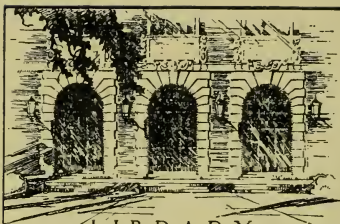


A MAN'S MISTAKE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

ST OLAVE'S



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A MAN'S MISTAKE

VOL. III.

A MAN'S MISTAKE

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ST. OLAVE’S,” “JANITA’S CROSS,” “ANNETTE,”
“LITTLE MISS PRIMROSE,”
&c., &c.

“Whatsoever thou takest in hand, remember the end,
and thou shalt never do amiss.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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A MAN'S MISTAKE.

. CHAPTER I.

AS soon as Linnet reached the little gate leading into the dingle, she struck aside from it, and made for the moorlands, where she hurried along in the teeth of a wild west wind which was sweeping down from the uplands beyond Broadminster.

Keith Moriston gone away, with neither word nor message of regret. Gone, never, if he could help it, to return. Gone, full of plans and purposes, never so full of them before, Miss Alvisa said. But not one of

them other than faithless to the past which she had been keeping so purely. For had he not said, that of his own will he would see Abbot's Florey no more?

So was this the way men did? Was this the end of their gentle manners and loving words? Was this to be, what she had taken him for, the truest knight that ever put spear in rest, the courtliest in hall among ladies, the goodliest that ever stepped? And was it for this, to be made a fool of and shaken off at his pleasure, so soon, at any rate, as he had "other plans and purposes," that Keith Moriston had drawn her to him, and won her to tell, if not by words, at least by a silence meaning more than words, that he was dear to her?

Linnet lifted her head and faced the November wind with hot cheeks and clear, bright, wide-open eyes that had lighted themselves from fires of contempt far down in her once so loving heart. Alas! in this little half hour since she had greeted Miss

Alvisa, what a strange new outlook had been opened for her in that quiet life which hitherto had held nothing but content. What it revealed, made her hate and despise, where before she had looked up with such utter reverence. And the pain of that was the sorest pain of all.

Linnet tore along until she found herself a couple of miles across the moor. Then, her anger being somewhat spent, and her strength too, she turned and came slowly homewards, her passion settling into a bitterness cool enough to let her go steadily over the past, and remember each little look and tone and touch, which was now an insult.

And he who had done it all was away, troubling himself with none of these things. For she could not forget Miss Alvisa's words, "Full of plans and purposes." So full that there was no room any more for herself amongst their brightness and novelty. Or—and then there came back to her what

Mrs. Aubury had said, "Attractions elsewhere, perhaps."

And if so, what was there left for her but to remember?

Nay, there was to forget. And she *would* forget, let the forgetting cost what it might.

Linnet set her lips together, and bent her pretty dark brows into a level line, and steadied her trembling little hands, and laughed down the passion in her heart, and stepped along quietly, with such a look upon her face now that one meeting her might have said that something had angered her very much, but never could have said that she had just gathered together and flung away from her all that a few hours ago had made the brightness of her young life.

And so she came down to the footpath behind Miss Alvisa's house, thinking to go home by the high-road, and so avoid the dingle, which would have been the nearest way. Small need now to go there any more. If only the storm, which had swept

away so much, could have swept away that also. If that avalanche which, loosened from some unknown mountain height, had rolled down into the valley of her peaceful little life, filling it with ruin and desolation, could have buried the hazel dell, and made that, too, a thing of the past! For why should a single poor remnant be left to remind her of the great wrong that had been done? Why should the life within be blasted, and the life without keep smiling on as if no storm had come? Why? But there were so many things to question now. And for answer she could only laugh at the folly which had once let her believe so much.

But, passing the gate which led into the dingle, something stronger than wild west wind of November, or storm of newly-arisen passion, turned her steps aside, and she paused, wondering what it meant.

It was the still, small voice of the past, calling to her faintly, but so sweetly, across

the war and tumult that vexed her soul. And she stood and listened, and she felt she must follow it.

Very quietly now she turned into the leaf-strewn path, over which the thinning autumn boughs scarcely hid any longer the clear, blue sky above them ; sheltering leaves all gone, to let Heaven's colour through. And on she went, her step so gentle now that it did not even startle the robins that with shy, bright eyes peeped at her through the hazel-covert ; and no thought of bitterness troubled her any more, for she was living in the happy days before wrong had come.

It all came back to her as she went along. Here Keith Moriston had seen her first, and here he had looked for answering look of love, and here the sweetest sweetness she had ever known had come into her waiting heart, and here the joy that never could be forgotten. And now she was down at the

swan-pools, where the bank overhung with many a tress of weed and blossom the clear, shining water which chattered over its gravelly bed. And here was the old willow-stump, with not a fibre touched nor spoiled of the moss whose green tracery had seemed to spell the letters of her love. And here was the little speck of golden lichen which shone like an illuminated initial of that writing; for she had been stooping to touch it when he so gently drew her back, and held her to him. And after that the story had been for two.

Linnet stood there, amidst perfect stillness and solitude. There seemed another way, not to fling aside this past which looked at her with its young pleading eyes from bank and stream and mossy manuscript; not to fling it aside, but to let it stay and be her companion, instead of the storm and tempest which had so closely followed it. She might, with one great effort, crush that

anger down. It was the stronger, but not the nobler part of herself, which made her revel in it, give herself entirely over to its dominion. Something, which she dimly felt to be better, was asking her to remember, and be at peace. For the past could never alter. She had only to wait until these driving mists, these storm-clouds of passion had swept themselves away, and there, far off, beyond them, beautiful in its unchangeableness, it remained, like clear, crystalline snow-peaks which rise, sunlit-ed in their golden brightness, in what seems another world, so untouched is its calm behind the rack and tempest of the nearer hills.

Linnet paused, and listened to those two voices speaking with her; one bidding her be true to the memory which, if never more than a memory now, was yet the memory of all that had been fairest in her life; the other bidding her cast it out, and trample it

down, and consume it with the fire of scorn.

But she was not scornful now. The soft, red lips were parted, the brow unbent, the brown eyes almost happy again in their loving light, as she stooped over that little bit of moss which seemed to tell the story of the past. She would be true to it. She would live henceforth in the remembrance of the love which had so blessed and brightened her life. It should be to her as that far off, sunlighted snow-peak, never more reached or touched, but always there to tell of a world which no storms could vex.

Then waking, as if from a dream, she lifted her head. She was just in front of the lime-trees which skirted Miss Alvisa's garden. Through their almost naked boughs she could see across to the green lawn and the beech-tree, from one of whose branches the swing-ropes, unused now, were swaying to and fro.

That brought it all back. She had just been to see Miss Alvisa. Miss Alvisa had told her that Keith Moriston had gone away without word or message for her—gone, never to come back again, if he could help it. He had forgotten her, now that his new plans and purposes kept him from needing the amusement she could give. It was all so mean, so heartless. Should she indeed remember it?

Linnet stooped down and laid her cheek for just a moment upon the soft green moss. Then she grasped the mouldering trunk, and with all her young strength tore it up and flung it into the pool. The water closed over it, then it rose again, but only to show a mass of crumbling rottenness; the moss was out of sight underneath. And then the whole thing drifted away amongst the sedge.

It was done with. There was no past for her now. She had chosen the present, and would be content with what it had to

give. And holding her head very proudly, and stepping like a young queen, she went home.

CHAPTER II.

THE next day but one was the day of the picnic, and why should not Linnet enjoy it as much as any of them? Mr. and Mrs. Aubury brought Mr. Burstborough with them when they returned from that drive to Broadminster. There were really so many things to be arranged just at the last that Mrs. Aubury said it was a thousand pities he had given up that little cottage at Abbot's Florey. It would have saved so much trouble to have had him on the spot to consult with him. Still, however, she took care that he should be on the spot pretty frequently. And, the day before

the picnic, he must spend nearly all his time at the castle, for there were programmes to draw out, and names of the guests to be written, and their places at the luncheon to be decided, and the flowers which had been sent over from Broadminster to be made up into bouquets, and a few final alterations to be talked over in the list of amusements ; and, on the whole, it would be much more convenient for Mr. Burstborough to remain at the castle altogether for the previous day, as then there would be no time wasted in running backwards and forwards.

Mr. Burstborough consented willingly. The more so as something in Linnet's behaviour was beginning to make him feel a little uncomfortable. Not that there was the least fear of his proposals being received with other than the favour which they deserved, but her manner was taking that touch of coquetry and sauciness which might make her fascinating to others than

himself. She was appearing to him in quite a new light. That frank unconsciousness with which she at first received his advances had passed away. So had that touch of shyness which, while it lasted, had been so satisfactory as a sign that she at length understood and appreciated his intentions towards her. Now there was a dash of independence about her which was certainly charming, but at the same time the charm might not be confined to himself. The wider knowledge of society which she had attained since her brother's marriage was beginning to tell upon her. She was no longer the simple little country maiden, grateful for preference or attention, receiving it with happy surprise as something quite new. She had learned her own power now. She was prizing herself more highly, and this gave an air of confidence and womanliness to her deportment, which, though it would be admirably in place when she became the mistress of his beautiful house

in the suburbs of Broadminster, might make her an object of attraction to other claimants, as eager, if not as eligible, as himself. It was well, then, that the picnic, now so close at hand, would give him the opportunity of settling matters, and not only so, but of intimating to the guests assembled that they *were* settled.

The eventful day arrived, bringing with it sunshine as unclouded as one could look for in November. Not a guest failed. Mrs. Aubury took the part of hostess, and carried it through with admirable skill. Everything had been considered beforehand. There were no mishaps, no misadventures. Seldom had the grand bit of park witnessed a gayer group than Mr. Burstborough succeeded in gathering under the shelter of its beech-trees on that memorable November day. And never had Mr. Burstborough himself been so happy, so comfortable, so self-confident, as when, luncheon being over, and the guests dispersing for rest or ramble

as it pleased them best, before assembling for tea, and the dance afterwards, he came up to Linnet, who was laughing and chatting with two or three young lieutenants whom she had met at the Hunt Ball, and claimed her promise to accompany him up a picturesque little bit of woodland road to a knoll at some distance, from which a fine view of Broadminster could be commanded, including his own residence, with its attendant stabling, coach-houses, conservatories, lawns, paddocks, and all other requisites of a gentleman's mansion, in the very foreground of the landscape.

"You are not afraid to trust her with me, are you?" he said to Mrs. Aubury, who, on matronly cares intent, hovered in the neighbourhood of her charming young relative. And he said it with a look which meant more than words.

"Not at all," said Mrs. Aubury, smiling, as she watched the coquettish way in which Linnet accepted his offered arm. And

her looks also said more than the words.

Mr. Burstborough had made no secret, during the previous part of the day, of his preference for Miss Aubury ; and, now that he was going to manifest it more signally, he had no wish to elude observation or inquiry. Nay, that people should see the honour he wished to put upon her was rather pleasant than otherwise. Nor did she herself shrink from it. Instead she accepted it with a sort of careless ease which showed him that she quite understood whither it was leading, and that she was prepared for the consequences.

“I am going to show Miss Aubury the view from the top of the hill,” he said, as they passed Mrs. Flowerdale and her niece, Miss Georgiana Leverton. “Do you know she tells me she has never seen my house yet, and there is such a charming peep of it through the beech-trees on the knoll. *Au revoir !*”

And he waved his hand cheerily. Mrs.

Flowerdale thought, judging from appearances, that Miss Aubury would probably see enough of it by-and-by, but, like a well-bred woman, she held her peace. Certainly the young lady was wonderfully altered of late. Too much attention was beginning to spoil her. She had quite lost that pretty wondering look with which she used to receive the admiration and flattery of her first ball or two. She appeared now to take success as a matter of course. There was a consciousness about her manner which seemed to imply that she had learned to look upon herself as an object of interest.

“I never saw a girl, Georgiana, who put on an air of society so quickly. One would think she had been out for half a dozen seasons. And such a shy, bewildered thing as she was at that afternoon dance, only four months ago. Do you remember it, Georgiana? You were staying with the colonel's girls then.”

“ Oh ! yes, auntie, I remember perfectly well ; and how she flushed and coloured up if anyone so much as spoke to her. One could quite see, though, even then, that she would turn out a very handsome girl when she acquired a little more confidence. I always think a tall, dark girl, with plenty of colour, has such an advantage when her manners have once become equal to her appearance.”

“ Well, as to that, Linnet's manners are more than equal to any appearance now. I can only say, Georgiana, I should be very sorry to see *you* accept a gentleman's attentions with such free and careless independence. A young girl should always remember that there are circumstances when a certain amount of reserve, and, at any rate, an appearance of embarrassment, are becoming. Linnet does not seem to be conscious of either.”

“ Well, auntie, Mr. Burstborough seems

to be quite satisfied. Do you think he has made her an offer yet, or is it only going to be?"

"I really cannot say, Georgiana. And he is not the first person whose advances she has encouraged, only to let them drop. It may turn out nothing after all. But we will not follow them. I should not like us to meet again on their return. It might look like curiosity. You had better go back to the tent and rest awhile, so as to be ready for the dancing. You know, you are not so much accustomed to outdoor exercise as Miss Aubury."

Linnet and her companion reached the top of the knoll. The house was duly pointed out, its advantages dwelt upon, its convenient proximity, both to the city and the beautiful moorland and woodland districts which lay beyond. Linnet could not help thinking what a very good estate agent the owner would have made. His remarks read so like the advertisements she had

seen sometimes in Debenham and Tewson's monthly lists. But she assented to everything that was said, and even pointed out a few beauties on her own account, beauties which had escaped the more material Mr. Burstborough, such as the mould of moss and lichen which would by-and-by accumulate on the north side of the house, facing as it did the Florey marshes, and the delightful punting one might have whenever the Broadminster river overflowed. But Mr. Burstborough was not a man who detected satire. And Linnet, knowing what was to come of that walk, kept hers within bounds. She was very quickly learning all that was due from a girl of society, who intends to become a woman of the world.

The house being duly admired, Mr. Burstborough turned to his companion and said,

“Miss Aubury, I asked Mrs. Aubury awhile ago if she would trust you to me an hour

or so. I am going to ask you now if you will trust yourself to me for longer than that, even for all your life."

Linnet neither blushed nor trembled. She knew he had been meaning to say something of the kind, and that this walk had been arranged to expedite his intentions. Mrs. Aubury had told her, with an air of confidential importance, during their drive together to the picnic, that Mr. Burstborough's intentions were now beyond any doubt, and that she must prepare herself for the proposal which he would probably make before the close of the day. Also that, if she did not mean to accept it, she must behave to him in such a manner as to prevent him from speaking. A girl of true refinement, Mrs. Aubury added, would always save a man from the pain and humiliation of refusal by letting him see beforehand what her own feelings were.

"Which I think you have done, Linnet dear, very unmistakeably during the past

few weeks, and still more so within the last day or two, and it gives much satisfaction, both to your brother and myself, that you have fixed your choice so wisely. Mr. Burstborough is a man quite worthy of everything that you can bestow upon him. At the same time, I wish to caution you that, unless you are fully prepared to accept him, you must on no account now allow yourself to receive any further attentions. By doing so, you will compromise both yourself and him to a most undesirable extent."

To which most excellent advice, Linnet replied that she had already made up her mind. And that was all.

So she did not need to pause very long, as Mr. Burstborough stood there beside her on the knoll, which commanded such a fine prospect of his new house. This man, at any rate, was not playing with her. What he meant he said honestly and straightforwardly. She did not care for him. No

word of his had ever quickened pulse of hers. Still she could do what he asked, she could trust the comfort of her life to his keeping. At any rate he could be a refuge from the intolerable humiliation which had come upon her; and, what was even more, he could be the means of enabling her to show Keith Moriston that his faith, or unfaith, was of very little importance to her. If he could easily forget, so could she.

All this, and only this, was in her thoughts as she said quietly to Mr. Burstborough,

“*I can trust you.*”

With these words she raised a screen between herself and a once loved, but now hated past. More than that, it was a barrier through which she felt she could never again, with a clear conscience, penetrate to recall that past, either for good or evil. It had gone from her. She was free of it. It was done with as completely as that little mossy legend which even now was rotting

on the old willow-stump amongst the sedges of the swan-pools.

Of course Mr. Burstborough quite expected a favourable answer. He had not been listening for it with anything like eager, quivering suspense; nor did he, when it was given, go into raptures over it. Still it was a relief to have the thing settled, and settled at the time, and in the manner, and under the circumstances which he had planned beforehand. And, according to his lights, he felt both proud and happy as he drew Linnet's arm within his own, and pressed a kiss upon her lips, and led her down the pathway towards the tent, which was now prepared for the afternoon dance.

As for Linnet, the thing once being done, she did not attempt to realise very vividly what it meant. Anyway, there was a plain path before her now. She knew what she had to do; and the time had not yet come for her to ask herself, with any sickening suspicion of doubt, whether she had courage

to go on with it. As, leaning on Mr. Burstborough's substantial arm, she trod the golden-brown leaves, and passed under the thinning beech-tree branches to the tent, now brilliantly lighted, and beginning to fill with groups of laughing guests, it seemed to her a sort of picture of what had happened within the last day or two. There was no longer any fairy land of romance for her, any shining of Heaven's blue through thinning boughs, on which the golden glory of autumn lingered, any glamour of mystery, or hope, or wonder in the way she had chosen for herself. Instead, there was a good canvas awning of common-place over her head, well decorated with ropes of ever-greens, and festoons of gaily-coloured paper flowers; thickly carpeted with the best of cocoa-nut matting from damp, or mould, or faintest little green film of mossy writing; lighted up to its farthest corner with lamps which left no recesses of imagination to be explored, no secrets, pleasant or otherwise,

to be revealed. And the people who came and went about her now were intelligible human beings, in well-cut tailors' suits, or tasteful promenade costumes, which, according to Hursley's latest circulars, skilfully blended the grace of evening with the simplicity of morning wear; not heroes or heroines any more, whom fancy could credit with all noble and chivalrous qualities, to find them, upon closer inspection, rotten at the core, like that bit of old willow-stump, which she had awhile ago torn up and flung into the pool.

And she, too, felt comfortable and common-place, to match her surroundings. And the pretty dress which Mrs. Aubury and Mrs. Polemont had helped her to choose at Broadminster the week before, covered a heart in which no foolish fancies any longer reached out after what could never be attained. She had left the ideal for the real, the autumn leaves for the paper flowers, the blue sky—to which she had

once looked up with such infinite love and wonder and hope—for the good stout awning of canvas at so much a yard, safe to keep out, all through the years of her future, any faintest streak of sunshine; but safe, too, to shelter her from storm and tempest such as that which through Keith Moriston's hazel covert had beaten so cruelly upon her.

CHAPTER III.

MR. BURSTBOROUGH'S radiant countenance sufficiently indicated the state of matters as he brought Linnet back to Mrs. Aubury. Then the dancing, which had only been waiting for their return, began. Mrs. Aubury and Mr. Burstborough opened the first quadrille, after which he claimed Linnet for a waltz, leaving the mistress of Florey Castle to enjoy at her leisure the conclusion of the whole matter.

“It is just as well for poor young Moriston that he had to go away in such a hurry,” said Mrs. Flowerdale, whose niece was waltzing too, so that the two elder

ladies could have a chat. "It would have been rather an uncomfortable state of things for him, would it not?"

"Probably," said Mrs. Aubury, with an air of unconcern. "He is not much of a dancing man. And so shy that general society must be rather a bore to him, as it is to my husband."

"Oh! I do not mean that sort of thing at all, my dear Mrs. Aubury. I believe, if young Moriston had been here this afternoon, his discomfort would have arisen from quite a different cause."

And Mrs. Flowerdale glanced at the newly-engaged couple. Linnet's eyes were bright with excitement. The rosy flush of conquest was upon her cheek—conquest over a past which had once been sweet. As for her substantial, well-to-do lover, the means by which the conquest had been achieved, she no more triumphed in him than a general does in the piece of heavy cannon which has brought down some par-

ticular point in the enemy's fortress. An entry has been won, but the cannon does not get the honour. However, Mrs. Flowerdale did not know that.

"I was thinking how disappointed the poor fellow would have been to see how things have gone to-day."

"You mean on Linnet's account? Oh, dear, no, I can assure you there was never any feeling of that sort between them."

"Indeed! Then probably it was all on one side, which makes it so much worse for him. So blind of Miss Alvisa not to see why he hurried off in that manner, and when he had promised to stay a whole month. But of course Linnet knows."

"No, Mrs. Flowerdale, she does not, and both her brother and myself would be excessively sorry for her to have any idea of it. I have every reason to believe that the affection which she has given to Mr. Burstborough is the first which she has ever

entertained for anyone—at least, in that way.”

Mrs. Aubury said this with a certain degree of asperity, not only because it would be almost fatal to her own comfort for Linnet to learn the real state of the case, but because Mrs. Flowerdale talked about these subjects with the air of a woman who had a right to make remarks on the affairs of her neighbours, and to inquire about them too. Ever since she became the wife of Mr. Aubury, the feeling between herself and Mrs. Flowerdale had been cooling into indifference, but an indifference which would with very little provocation pass into dislike. Mrs. Flowerdale never rested until she got to the bottom of any subject which interested her, and the antecedents of Mrs. Aubury were, as that lady knew only too well, a subject which interested her very much—so much that she would probably never rest until the haze which enveloped them had been cleared away.

Of course to have it cleared away would be exceedingly inconvenient to Mrs. Aubury. Moreover, as she said to herself, it was nobody's business but her own and her husband's, and, as he had never asked her any questions, it was not her place to invite them. She had once thought, soon after their marriage, of mentioning the subject to him, but the opportunity had passed away, and now to say anything would be simply impossible. Still she felt that it was always more or less present in the mind of Mrs. Flowerdale, and, if explained, would afford a means of humiliating herself in the eyes of Abbot's Florey, which that lady would not be loth to use.

For Mrs. Flowerdale's expectations of the parochial advantages contingent upon Mr. Aubury's marriage had not by any means been realised. As a widow lady of small means and large leisure, Mrs. Plummersleigh had been devoted to benevolent work of all kinds. Clubs were her delight. She

was ready to embrace duty to almost any amount in the shape of district-visiting and tract distribution. If subscription-lists had to be taken round, she was ever ready to take them. Indeed the vicar said she was worth almost as much to him as a curate, because, though what she could give in hard cash was little, what she gave in personal interest and labour was worth a great deal. And so both he and his wife were hopeful that when she assumed the management of affairs at the castle—and assume it they were sure she would—there would be a considerable rise in the proportion of his income which Mr. Aubury set apart for parochial charities.

But things did not improve in that direction at all. Now that, instead of collecting subscriptions, the giving of them became a duty, Mrs. Aubury was by no means such a burning and shining light as her previous behaviour had led people to hope. And instead of the activity which might have

been expected from her, she assumed the privileges of a person in delicate health, and looked upon herself as one to be paid attention to and considered to a quite unwarrantable extent—unwarrantable, at least, for a lady who had entered the parish with so very little in the shape of introduction; nay, more than that, about whom no one had been able to extract any more information than that her relatives were distant, and did not seem disposed to take much notice of her.

But the fact was that Mrs. Aubury's love of supremacy—a love which moved the most active springs of her life, had now found a more satisfactory outlet. A woman who had been placed so unexpectedly at the head of a house like Florey Castle, with a good position, abundant means, servants to manage, and a husband to control, was not likely to value so much as heretofore the authority which consisted mainly in urging the superior merits of vegetables over fried

fat in the kitchens of the poorer classes. Nor had she the large heart which adapts itself to larger means ; for, instead of urging Mr. Aubury to increased liberality in the matter of snbscriptions, she brought her influence to bear upon him in such a manner that the vicar soon found out it was safer to ask him for a guinea when the lady of the house was absent.

So that Mrs. Flowerdale, who measured people very much by their usefulness in parish matters, was by no means so cordial with Mrs. Aubury as she had been with Mrs. Plummersleigh. Indeed there was not unfrequently a little passage of arms, quite polite of course, when the two ladies met : the vicar's wife being a woman who could say a sharp thing as cleverly as most people, and say it, too, in such a way that it could not be fastened upon. And this was the state of things between them as they chatted with such apparent pleasantness in the picnic tent, whilst the young ladies of whom

they were in respective charge were waltzing to the strains of the Broadminster band.

Mrs. Aubury had just asserted, with a slight degree of asperity, that the affection which Linnet had recently bestowed upon Mr. Burstborough was the first of its kind of which she had ever been conscious.

"Well, if it is really so," replied the vicar's wife, "I am very glad. It is so delightful for a girl to marry her first love, and one so seldom hears of it now-a-days. And then, you know, Mr. Burstborough's antecedents are everything that could be desired."

Mrs. Aubury could have annihilated Mrs. Flowerdale upon the spot, but that not being practicable, she showed no change of countenance.

"And I always say it is so much more satisfactory to know all about everything of that kind. You know it is sure to come out sooner or later, however much mystery is made about it at first. Although, for

that matter, Miss Alvisa has been exceedingly sensible in making known from the beginning what poor young Moriston really sprang from. A shepherd's son, you know, or something of that sort, at Airdrie Muir, the very place, Mrs. Aubury, where your friends live."

"Exactly. Though," replied Mrs. Aubury, with the air of a poor relation who has been dropped by her more prosperous friends, "that really does not make the place any more interesting to me. I have not the slightest wish to thrust myself upon the notice of any of my people there."

"Oh! dear, no. I was not thinking about that at all. Only it is so curious that you should both of you travel so far, to meet in a little village like this. And I believe Mr. Aubury used to shoot in that neighbourhood too, and my boy Reginald sometimes says he should like to rent a bit of moor there."

Mrs. Flowerdale scanned Mrs. Aubury's face narrowly, to find out if there was any annoyance in it at this remote prospect of anything definite being ascertained about her. But she was calm as ever. Just toying with her richly-painted fan,—one of Mr. Aubury's wedding presents, no doubt,—and watching the gay couples go fleeting past, with as little concern as if no hint of the kind had been dropped. She did not even seem particularly anxious to quit the mention of young Moriston either.

“Going back to the Stormonts, I suppose, when he has seen enough of his people up there,” she said, as Linnet and Mr. Burstborough passed them again.

“I don't know. I fancy not. Percy said something about his going as professor to some college at Heidelberg. A rather beggarly living, I should think, but still quite as much as he could expect at present. I fancy the Stormonts only just had him as

a convenience, nothing at all permanent in the arrangement. Indeed, of course there could not be, when he was expecting to get that Calcutta professorship. A most unlikely expectation, if Miss Alvisa could only have looked sensibly at it. I hope, for my own part, he will settle down somewhere, quite away from here. He is no favourite of mine."

"Nor mine either, Mrs. Flowerdale."

And then Mrs. Aubury dropped the subject. For the music had ceased, and Mr. Burstborough, beaming, but a little out of breath with the unusual exertions he had been making, brought his fair partner up to her chaperon.

But setting the question of Airdrie Muir aside,—and she was firmly convinced there was something to be found out in that direction,—the vicar's wife had another grudge against Mrs. Aubury. That most impenetrable of women might say what she liked, but Mrs. Flowerdale gave herself credit for

as much discernment as most people, and she was quite sure there had been something between Linnet and young Moriston, which accounted for his going away in such a hurry. The vicar himself had mentioned it, and he never spoke without reason. Had he not been right about Mr. Aubury and Mrs. Plummersleigh, before ever that engagement had been mentioned publicly? And he was right about young Moriston too, not a doubt of it. And she firmly believed that, if Mrs. Aubury had let matters take their course, those two young people would have made a match of it, at some very distant period, probably, but still a match it would have been. At any rate, an engagement.

And in that case Mr. Burstborough would have been free for some one else. Whereas now, the extravagant girl had, as it were, appropriated two people, young Moriston being good for nothing, matrimonially speaking, and Mr. Burstborough

engaged. And whether she would marry him either, or only spoil him for anyone else, no one could tell. For her own part, however promising appearance looked now, she did not believe it ever would be a match. Because when she gave her congratulations to Linnet, Mrs. Aubury having said there was no need to keep the matter a secret, the girl's lip had curled almost scornfully; and whatever else there might be in the look which she cast upon Mr. Burstborough, smiling and bowing by her side, there was certainly no love in it.

However, young Moriston might as well know why Miss Aubury had changed her behaviour to him so suddenly, there not being the shadow of a doubt that she *had* changed it. And so when her husband wrote, as he had occasion to do in the course of a day or two, to the young man somewhere on the Continent, she told him to add a postscript, saying that another

engagement had been made in the village, and that before Christmas Mr. Aubury's young sister would be Mrs. Burstborough.

CHAPTER IV.

“**I**T looks like business, Betsey, does that,” said old Martlet to his wife, as she came back from opening the keep gate for Mr. Burstborough, who, brisk, buoyant, and important, had just driven through in his fashionable dog-cart, newly done up for the picnic.

Mrs. Aubury sat behind, as comfortable as rugs and cushions could make her in the position. Not that in a general way she was a person who enjoyed riding behind, either metaphorically or literally; but by doing it on this occasion, whilst Linnet occupied the front seat at Mr. Burstborough’s

side, she openly proclaimed to the picnic guests, most of whom were passed on the way home—the host, though starting last, driving the fastest horse amongst them—that an understanding had been arrived at, and that the wealthy owner of The Willows, Broadminster, need no longer be an object of emulation amongst the neighbouring young ladies. Under such circumstances, Mrs. Aubury sat behind with a good grace, being even more than satisfied with her position.

“It looks like business, Betsey, it does, and the missis a woman that mostly aims to put herself to the front. I don’t know, Betsey, as you nor me ever saw her set like that afore since she come to this place.”

“No, Martlet,” said his wife, between whom and the mistress of Florey Castle no love was lost. “It isn’t Madam Aubury that you’ll often catch playing second fiddle when Miss Linnet has got the first. I’ve never known her do it, nor shouldn’t now

if there wasn't something out of the common. There's a deal in it, Martlet, you may depend."

"I told you that a good bit ago, Betsey honey, so you needn't look as pert 'as if you'd found it out yourself. It's Mr. Burstborough our young lady's going to marry, you see if it isn't, and fine and glad madam is about it, too. You can see it by the very way she holds herself. Law! one would think she couldn't say a cross word to nobody, for as smiling as she sits there among her rugs and things; and the way she rowed me only yesterday was a week, because one of the sheep had gotten into the front lawn. Folks is different when things is different."

"That's where it is, Martlet. I don't doubt but what her temper'll get a change if there's a wedding to come round. It's what she'll be glad enough of, and Miss Linnet the bride. Mark my words if she won't."

And the old couple, who had, as Betsey

prophesied before the master's marriage, made a change to the two rooms in the keep, watched the dog-cart as it sped round the courtyard to the great entrance, where Mr. Burstborough jumped down and assisted Mrs. Aubury out, and then, with needless leisureliness, lifted Linnet from her perch.

"She would ha' sprung it once," said the old man, shrewdly, "and she was set for to do it this time, only he was afore with her, as he's that sort of man that doesn't lose time neither with his money-making nor his courting. And, Betsey, Miss Linnet don't look as spry about it as the missis does. She hangs her wings limp and loose like, as if there wasn't much of flying in them, and there's something in that. I haven't seen her coming and going this better than ten years not to know when she's in feather and when she isn't."

"Hold your noise, Martlet!—what can you tell? It's a tiring thing is a picnic, let

you have as much strength as you will for it. And then it isn't always them that looks brightest has it inside. That night you and me agreed to keep company, Martlet, you said one might have thought I'd seen a ghost, I looked that quiet and skeered-like, and for all that you did you couldn't get me to brighten up."

"Ay, Betsey, but I did get you to hang on to me a bit, same as if we was going to belong to each other all our lives. I lay, if it had been a dog-cart same as Mr. Burstborough's we'd had the luck to ride in from Broadminster Martinmas fair that night, you wouldn't have wanted to spring afore I'd got hold of you fast enough. And not have held yourself as upright as a mopstick neither, so as I shouldn't get a chance to touch you, same as she did when they was driving past. If I'm wrong, Betsey, you can speak the word."

"You're not wrong, Martlet." And a smile like October sunshine over a well-

filled stackyard warmed Betsey's comely face as she said it. "And I remember how kind of proud I felt to think I'd got you to open the gates for me as we come along the back road to Miss Goodenough's. I don't know as I ever felt better pleased than I did that night to think I'd got you to open 'em for me. And I've never lost it, Martlet."

"No, nor hadn't need to, Betsey. A man isn't good for much as can't open a good few more gates for his missis—ay, and difficulter ones, too, than any betwixt here and Miss Goodenough's. And it's a sure sign, Betsey, that all isn't as it should be, when she's always set for to start forward and open them herself. That's the way with madam."

"Nay, then, Martlet, there you're wrong, if ever you were. It isn't so much as a finger that she'll lift for herself if the master's there to lift it for her. I lay she'd let him put the very vittles into her mouth, if

it was to save her trouble. And to think how she'd used to go about before ! I've heard my sister Wright say Mrs. Plummersleigh was that sort as couldn't rest. But it isn't a deal, Martlet, she does now that she hadn't need to."

"You don't see what I mean, Betsey. It isn't them kind of gates, nor that sort of trouble. It's when a woman sets herself to be fore-horse of the team, as madam does, that I say it tells the wrong story. You can see it as plain as a pikestaff with everything that goes on here. It's the missis as comes to the front and has her say before there's a word for master or man. And it's a poor way is that, Betsey. I always say there's a deal wrong when a woman don't shelter herself and snuggle up to him as has the right to take care on her, and when, instead, she's always for giving orders, and setting herself to know such a vast, same as the missis does. Our master's happened on the wrong one, Betsey, though

I wouldn't whisper it to no one but yourself, on account of its not going farther. I looks round about, Betsey, and I sees, and I've noticed a deal this few weeks past. Master isn't the man he'd used to be before he wed Mrs. Plummersleigh."

"Well, one can't say he's a quieter, Martlet."

"No, he always had it for that; but it's what says more than quietness now, Betsey. It's that kind of way as don't seem to see nothing bright at the far end. Only just a-going on and on whilst you've anything to go on with. Not but what he'll do his duty, for the master's a man as will never miss that, whatever else he has to miss. But, Betsey, he's missed a deal—ay, more than you nor me can tell, and that's all about it."

"Well, Martlet, I don't doubt but what you're right," said Betsey, bustling round to put away the supper things, and close up for the night, for it was well on to eleven

now, and there was nothing to wait for but Mr. Burstborough's departure, before which time the great gate could not be finally locked. "But all the same it wasn't you found out the missis was a sharp one. I told you it, if you remember, from the very first, before ever she was planted here. I named *my* opinion that day the master, poor man! sent for me into the room to give me notice what was to happen. And, what's more, I've never had cause to go back from it. And, Martlet"—here Betsey laid down a supper-plate, and came a step or two nearer to her husband, with a look of the strictest confidence upon her face, and an intonation labelled "private" in her voice—"Martlet, if the missis is as pleased as Punch about Mr. Burstborough, it's because she thinks she'll have things more her own way when Miss Linnet is wed. The master isn't that sort as takes off one to put it on another, and madam don't like his heart being set as it is on the young lady.

Martlet, there's that in his smile for Miss Lianet as the missis never gets for herself, no, nor never will, she being the sort she is. But even if she knows she can't get it,—and know she does,—she'd a deal rather another didn't have it, and that's why. Martlet, there's things that *you* can see, and there's things that I can see. And the missis is a party I can measure up as correct as if I'd had to do with the making of her myself. She's never had a thought for Miss Linnet since she came to this here place, but only how she could get her wed to be out of the way."

"Then she might have wed her to Mr. Moriston, as had used to come about the place like one of the family. It was easy to see what he was set on, and she a deal different with him from what she's ever been with Mr. Burstborough. I lay, Betsey, if it had been Mr. Moriston she wouldn't have sprung afore he'd had time to lift her, that wouldn't she."

Betsey smiled as she returned to the washing of the plates. Martlet was a man who did get hold of a good thing sometimes, but when he did he could not let it alone. He was proud as a goose with one gosling.

“Martlet, I won’t deny you said that neatly, but, all the same obliged to you, I’ve heard it before, and I think I can remember it till next time. It’s a bad pot that wants such a deal of watching. It might be only because she’d got the cramp with sitting so long that she sprung at all. I’ve known myself be that stiff when I’ve been sitting up with the brewing that I could almost have jumped over the winter hedge to stretch myself, only with the weight I carry it wouldn’t have been convenient. All the same I don’t deny that she hasn’t the manner as if she was as pleased as the missis. But, Martlet, don’t go to think that, if it had been Mr. Moriston

up in frônt, madam would have settled herself to sit behind. Not she, nor wouldn't have let it be Mr. Moriston at all, and him with the little he has to set up a house with, to say nothing of the rest of the things, as they do say the Willows is a palace, and wants nothing but a lady, which it's going to get likewise."

"Whist, Betsey, he's coming. You'd better get to the gate in time."

For that was a duty Martlet always left to his wife, he opening the gates for her in so many other ways. He was a Conservative as to woman's rights, and naturally thought that if he, as head of the family, made a plain path for her beyond the domain of their own home, the least she could do in return was to be ready for the humbler services close at hand, whilst he, the lordlier tasks fulfilled, smoked his pipe at his own chimney-corner in peace.

Betsey went and dropped a low curtsy

as Mr. Burstborough, beaming all over with success and complacency, reined up his horse to have the keep-gate flung open.

“Thank you,” he said, as the good woman, with a needless show of labour, pushed it back. “I shouldn’t wonder if I often have to trouble you again, but I shall remember it at the right time.”

And so saying, he dropped half-a-crown into Betsey’s hand, and with a cheery good night rattled down the Broadminster turnpike road.

“Well, if that isn’t putting it plainly enough,” she said, as she came back to the cosy keep-room, “if that isn’t putting it plainly enough, I don’t know what plainness is. And pleasantly spoken too, and out with his money like a gentleman, as there isn’t a many does it with such a good will. He won’t pinch her, Martlet, you’ll see that, whatever else he may do.”

“You can’t tell, Betsey. It isn’t all of

them makes a start same as they mean to go on. I've known many a mild morning turn out a windy day; and contrary way you may set off without your mufflers and find you stand need of them before you're a mile gone. Not that I mean anything against him, Betsey, for that's what I don't mean, so don't you think it, nor speak it neither."

"Martlet, you needn't caution me. I'm not the woman to need it. And you've spoke my own mind, too. For without any offence after the half-crown, and maybe more to come, I'd rather it had been Mr. Moriston I'd opened the gate to, even if I were never a penny the better for it. I don't doubt but you feel the same, Martlet, if you felt it right to speak."

Martlet said he did feel just the same.

And if Linnet, sitting in her little chamber over the old chapel-room, looking out into the still November night, with her hand yet warm from her new lover's clasp, did not

feel it too, it was only because her nobler self lay sleeping, and she cared no longer for any waking to come.

CHAPTER V.

AS for the wedding, there was no need for delay on either side. Nay, on one side there was need for quite the contrary of delay. For though Mrs. Aubury said to herself and her husband and everyone else that it was a match of the purest affection, still she could not blind her eyes to the fact that Linnet's demeanour was not that of a girl for whom the bright dreams and fancies of her youth are about to be translated into brighter reality.

Not that there was anything to be uneasy about. It was entirely Linnet's own will to take the step she had taken. She

would not for the world have interfered with her choice in such an important matter. She believed she loved Mr. Burstborough well enough to be exceedingly happy with him; and, that being the case, there was no necessity for any very passionate attachment beforehand. Indeed in her opinion the most satisfactory marriages were those in which there had not been anything of the sort.

“For example, Isabel,”—it was Mrs. Polemont who had come to spend a long afternoon at the castle when the subject was introduced, Linnet having gone out for a walk across the moor with Mr. Aubury,—“for example, you have only to look at the Sturts, here in Abbot’s Florey. It is a well known fact that on the very morning of the day, during the evening of which Mr. Sturt made his proposal, she received an offer from another gentleman, which she would have accepted, only her parents, knowing Mr. Sturt’s intentions, asked her to wait for

a day or two before giving a decided answer, and in the meantime they told Mr. Sturt, and he came forward immediately, and she accepted him instead. Well, in that case, how could she have cared very much for either of them? And yet I am sure she is very happy now."

"Oh, dear, yes, Maria, very happy indeed, I believe. And I know the story is true, because I have heard her tell it myself. In fact, I think she is rather proud of telling it, because she says it is not every girl who has two offers in one day. Still, you know——"

"Oh! of course. I do not mean to say that I should like Linnet to behave in that way; nothing of the sort. I only mentioned it to show how unnecessary a very strong attachment is beforehand. And then there is Mrs. Flowerdale. The Miss Laudervilles say that she was almost driven into marrying the vicar, that she had been attached for years to a young man who was not in a

position to make her an offer, and that on the very morning of her wedding-day she said she would rather marry young Wedderburn on three and sixpence a week than have Mr. Flowerdale, even if he were Archbishop of Canterbury. Not much prospect there, one might say, for happiness, and yet almost anyone might be glad now to change places with the vicar and his wife, though I do believe she lords it over him a little sometimes."

"Perhaps she does, Maria. And some men are no worse for it. Indeed, whoever they married, they would be lorded over a little. I don't think Mr. Burstborough is a man of that sort, though."

"Indeed no. And, Isabel dear, you may rely upon it, there is not the shadow of a doubt about Linnet's prospects. If there had been, I should never have given my sanction to the engagement. She has had every opportunity of judging of his charac-

ter, and I spoke to her myself and cautioned her against receiving his attentions, if she were not prepared for what, I was convinced, he meant by them. So that she knew very well what was coming, and was really not taken by surprise at all."

"Well, Maria, if she loves him, it is all right; and I am sure I am delighted for her. Only, you know, I always had the feeling that she and young Moriston were cut out for each other. She did seem to have a sort of feeling for him, though of course it would not have been anything like such a good match for her as the one she is going to make now."

Mrs. Aubury looked serious. There were times when the doctor's flighty little wife needed to be remonstrated with by women of sense, though, on the whole, she was well meaning. Especially she must not be allowed to get hold of wrong ideas, or, at any rate, inconvenient ideas, on the subject

of young Moriston's attachment, and then carry them about to other people in the village.

"Isabel, I don't quite like to hear a young girl's affections commented upon. When she has once fixed them so suitably as Linnet has, it is better to let the matter rest. I assure you she is quite content, and I would rather you would not raise the question again, either with me or with anyone else. I should not like Mr. Burstborough to be annoyed by it."

"My dear Maria! I am not such a goose as to go and talk to Mr. Burstborough."

"No, but others might, after hearing you mention it. I have no reason to believe that Linnet had the least leaning towards young Moriston, or anyone else, before Mr. Burstborough stepped forward. And I am convinced that, so long as a sensible girl has no violent prior attachment, she can be happy with any intelligent man who is so

devoted to her as Mr. Burstborough is to Linnet."

"Yes, Maria, if only she seemed a little bit more in earnest; well, you know, I don't exactly mean in earnest, because one takes it for granted she is that, but you understand, a little more what one likes a girl to be who has just accepted her first offer,—full of dreams and romance, and all that sort of thing: thinking there is nobody in the wide world so good as the man that she has chosen, and making a hero of him, and letting everyone see that she does. I mean that, you know; heaps of things one can't exactly put into words, but still you can see if the feeling is there."

"I know what you mean," said Mrs. Aubury, smiling as from some serene height of wisdom, "but I assure you a girl may be very happy without any of that nonsense. Why, to bring the matter home to yourself, Isabel, I am sure you must remember well enough how, up to the very night you were

engaged to Dr. Polemont, young Hastings used to come to the house, and everyone said that he would be the one. And you yourself confessed if it could be possible for both of them to speak together, you should not know which to choose."

Mrs. Polemont shrugged her pretty shoulders. The indictment was correct. Mrs. Aubury had not over-stated the case at all.

"You are never tired of teasing me about that, Maria, though I must say you were a very good friend to me at the time. I tell George now that perhaps it might have been Jem Hastings after all that I should have decided upon, if it had not been for you telling me that I was just the sort of girl who ought to marry a man a great deal older than myself. And I am thankful to say there is not one woman in Abbot's Florey—no, nor anywhere else, that I would change places with now, though——"

And the little woman looked innocently unconscious of saying anything remarkable as she went on.

“Though there were at least half a dozen other men in Broadminster that I could just as soon have made up my mind to choose from, if neither George nor poor Jem had spoken to me. And I might have been just as happy. One can never tell. So that I hope Linnet will be all right. And then, you know, Maria, people who live in glass houses ought not to throw stones. You might have looked a little nearer home for an illustration. Did you not tell me yourself that your principal feeling for Mr. Aubury was that of esteem?”

“I did,” said Mrs. Aubury, dropping her large round eyelids until their whitey-brown lashes almost swept her cheek, “and it was only our marriage which changed that esteem into a deeper feeling. So that I have not the slightest anxiety for dear

Linnet. And besides, she will be saved from many troubles by making an early choice."

"Do you really think so, Maria? Why, I remember you once told me what a mistake it was for girls to marry too early. You said you had fallen into it yourself."

"I had, Isabel. But then, you see, I had no one to guide me, and Mr. Plummersleigh was not a man of Mr. Burstborough's experience."

"Was he not?"

And Mrs. Polemont peeped up in a pleasant confidential way.

"Maria dear, would you mind telling me what he was? I have so often wondered. I never liked to ask you before, but, now that you are so comfortably settled, there doesn't seem any harm in it."

"He was connected with one of the great steamship companies," said Mrs. Aubury, vaguely; "but I very seldom recall those days now, even in my thoughts. As

I told you before, it was not a happy marriage."

"No, and that makes me so glad now that you are so much better off with Mr. Aubury. Nobody need wish to have a better husband than he is; but I won't mention Mr. Plummerville again if you don't like it. Mrs. Flowerdale has asked me so often what he was that I told her I would some day ask you right out."

"Mrs. Flowerdale is rather inquisitive," said Mrs. Aubury, quietly, "but it is of no consequence. She is quite welcome to know what I have told you. You were to see the wedding silks this afternoon. Shall I send for them down now? Some of them are so lovely!"

"Oh! thank you." And Mrs. Polemont forgot all about the steamship company, as Mrs. Aubury knew she would, when silks, especially wedding silks, were brought to the front. "I never thought Linnet would have taken so much trouble about choosing

her things, but I tell her having a husband to please makes all the difference. And then this is to be a real wedding, is it not, Maria? Not such a miserable hole and corner affair as the other one. You must forgive me, because I don't mean any disrespect, but I have never forgotten my disappointment about the wretched turn out we had when you were married. You will go to the extent of bridesmaids this time, I hope."

"Yes, though we have not yet decided who they shall be; you see, it is rather difficult to make a selection, Linnet having no intimate friends amongst young people. She says she will leave it all to me, and so does Mr. Aubury. I am just to arrange everything as I think best. Mr. Burstborough wishes the whole to be done in style."

"Of course; they always do. It is the men who cry out against extravagance and all that sort of thing in weddings, but, when

it comes to their own, they are dreadfully discontented if no end of a fuss is not made. I daresay Mr. Burstborough will go in for a great deal more grandeur than Linnet herself would. But Linnet must be going in pretty considerably, as far as the silks are concerned. Half a dozen new ones, did you say?"

"Yes, and perfectly lovely. You shall see them directly. Hursley got them down from London on purpose, as he had nothing in the shop that suited our taste. We cannot arrange the bridesmaids' dresses until we decide who they are to be, because of suiting the colours to the complexions, you know."

"Unless you selected them first, and then chose the complexions according to the colours. That is what I should do, because you don't think of anything else at a wedding, except the costumes. Dear me! but I am glad Mr. Burstborough insists upon a little display being made. Somebody

was saying there hasn't been a wedding from the castle for fifty years, and it would be a shame not to have everything proper. Any decorations?"

"Oh! yes. The young men of the village are forming themselves into a decoration committee, and there are to be arches, and banners, and Venetian masts, and mottoes, and I don't know what."

"Delightful! I do so enjoy weddings of all kinds, except when the people are old and ugly, and then I say they ought to be married under an extinguisher. Why, if it is only a kitchen-maid and a sweep, I always go into church to see the ceremony, if I happen to be passing at the time; and I haven't missed a real grand wedding in Broadminster these five years. You remember, Maria, how clever I used to be in finding out when and where they were to be. The guests will all have to come from one side of the family again, this time, just as they did at your wedding. Linnet is

very poorly off for relations, but she will have her brother, at any rate, and you had nobody."

At this point Mrs. Aubury wisely turned the conversation by giving it a personal bearing.

"We shall have you, I hope, Isabel. Mr. Aubury said he should like you to be at the breakfast, though we have not sent out any invitations yet."

"Oh, Maria! I shall be delighted. Will it be very soon?"

"Well, some time before Christmas, at any rate. So you must begin to think about your dress."

Which Mrs. Polemont did there and then. And she was still talking about it when Linnet and Mr. Aubury came in from their walk.

CHAPTER VI.

“**L**INNET has a headache. She asked me to say that she will not come down this afternoon,” said Mr. Aubury, as he took his usual place on the draughty side of the room. “She seems very tired, and worn out.”

“Oh! It is that tearing east wind, Owen, which drives across the moor so at this time of the year. If you notice, it nearly always gives me a headache, if you take me for a walk in that direction. You don’t seem to feel it yourself, but I assure you it affects me directly. And Linnet will persist in wearing such light hats, and she takes them

off to let the wind blow through her hair. It is such a foolish fancy."

"But she has had a good deal of headache lately, Maria, when she has not been out on the moor at all."

"Of course, my dear. When a thing of that kind once begins, it goes on. I daresay you remember, Isabel——?"

And Mrs. Aubury turned to Mrs. Polemont.

"I daresay you remember, when I was nursing your father through that attack of rheumatic fever, how neuralgia got hold of me, and I have never been able to shake it off since."

"Was it really that?" said Mrs. Polemont, innocently. "Dear me! George always said it was going to that picnic, and getting your feet damp."

"That might lay the foundation of it, Isabel, but it was the nursing that fixed it in my constitution. I shall never again be what I was before your father's attack, and

I believe Dr. Polemont would say so if you asked him seriously. And, if Linnet will persist in going out in these roaring winds with such insufficient protection upon her head, it will be just the same with her, except that she will only have herself to blame. Of course, where there is a call of duty, it makes all the difference."

"Can we send Linnet anything?" said Mr. Aubury, quietly.

"No, dear, I think not. She must not stay up in her room in the cold. It is just the way to make her headache worse. Will you kindly go up to her and say I should like her to come and sit here by the fire."

That was a command, and Mr. Aubury obeyed it. Everyone said what a polite and attentive husband he was, and what a great deal of waiting upon his wife was beginning to require. But then she required it in such a quiet, undemonstrative way. She was not like some women who always seem to be calling upon other people

to notice how much they are fussed over. Mrs. Aubury just had a way of getting things done for her. Indeed she seemed to have trained the people at the castle already into finding out what she wanted, and getting it done without any asking at all.

And it was a command for Linnet which she, too, obeyed, knowing that matters would be the worse for her afterwards if she made any show of resistance.

It was well something had been said about a headache, for she came into the drawing-room looking so haggard that Mrs. Polemont, who generally said what was uppermost in her mind, could scarcely repress an exclamation of distress. If the poor girl had been slowly nearing her funeral instead of her wedding day, the doctor's wife remarked on her return home, she could but have had a face like that.

"Linnet, my dear," said Mrs. Aubury, in her quiet, unemphatic manner, but with such a ring of decision underneath it,

“what a pity it is for you to trifle with yourself in this way! And you know it does give so much anxiety to other people. If it were required from you as a duty it would be such a different thing. Owen dear, will you kindly go into the dining-room and fetch her a glass of sherry? As I was just saying to Mrs. Polemont, Linnet, when I laid the foundation of my neuralgia by attending upon Mr. Fledborough, there was a necessity for it, but really, in your case, my dear, there is nothing of the kind. Come to the fire now, and get warm.”

Linnet stayed where she was, in the deep window recess, a look of cold, dull misery upon her face, anything but consistent with the perfect satisfaction which should have accompanied a happy engagement such as hers had just been represented. Mrs. Aubury left her comfortable seat by the fire to remonstrate.

“Linnet,” she said, in a low, severe whisper.

"Let me alone," cried the girl, pushing her away. And then she burst into a fit of passionate weeping.

Most unpleasant. And Mrs. Polemont full of curiosity and wonder sitting there, a witness of it all. Mrs. Polemont, who had already expressed doubts as to the approaching marriage being one of the purest affection.

"Hysterics," she said, looking back to the doctor's wife. And then, taking firm hold of Linnet's arm, she led her away into the dining-room, returning after a few minutes with her usual look of quiet unconcern.

"Mrs. Aubury, how is she? I am so sorry."

"Better, thank you. She quieted down immediately. It is well that I know how to manage anything of that kind. You might perhaps think me a little harsh, but it is the only way to check those hysterical bursts. One must be firm and decided."

"Yes, so George says. I don't have hysterics myself, though. And I never heard of Linnet having them before."

"Nor I. But she has been taxing her strength far too much of late. We are constantly out now, for she does not seem content unless we accept every invitation, and then there is the excitement of the wedding, which is coming on so rapidly. I shall be very glad, for her sake, when it is over."

Mrs. Polemont shrugged her shoulders again. She was more than ever convinced that there was something wrong.

"And so shall I, Maria, if it affects her in this way. I never saw a girl so altered in my life, and other people say the same. She looked a perfect picture of misery when she came into the room just now. But I suppose it is, as you say, with going so much into company just now. You certainly did manage beautifully. I never have the least

idea what to do when people begin to cry in that excited way. I feel as if I wanted to comfort them."

"The very worst thing you can do, Isabel. If I had attempted to soothe Linnet when she gave way just now, she would soon have been positively choking. But, you see, by quietly controlling her, she was able to recover herself, and she was quite calm when I left her. A night's rest will set her all right."

"Well, I hope it will. It is a great pity she cannot take things more quietly. I am glad Mr. Burstborough wants to have the marriage at once, if that is the way she means to go on. She won't have a bit of colour left, and then just fancy what a difference it will make in her appearance! A complexion like hers a month ago would have looked positively lovely under a Honiton lace veil; but I am beginning to have serious doubts now as to whether white will

suit her at all. It is very trying, you know, by daylight, when there is no colour in the cheeks."

"Oh! she will pick up before then, Isabel. I shall insist upon her keeping perfectly quiet now. All dances and dinner-parties must be declined. And she must not go out upon the moors when these wild autumn winds are blowing. You see, it is tearing along at such a rate that has done all the mischief this afternoon."

"Perhaps. And yet that sort of thing never did her any harm before. Dear me! how I have seen her go careering over Mr. Aubury's fields, with her hair flying like a banshee, and *such* a colour in her cheeks, and the faster she went the better it seemed to suit her. And her spirits! Oh, Maria, what spirits she used to have!"

Mrs. Aubury looked annoyed. This sort of thing was not comfortable. And she attempted a diversion again in the direction of the wedding silks, which Tidy was or-

dered to bring down now. They were just going to be sent for before, when Linnet came in and made that untoward exhibition of her feelings.

But Tidy was a long time, probably lingering to admire them on her own account; and all the while Mrs. Polemont kept on about the altered appearance of the bride-elect.

“Such a difference, Maria, in every way. None of that natural easy manner that she used to have. And she looks a dozen years older, if a day, within the last three weeks. It isn't my fancy, Maria—it really is not. Everyone is noticing it.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs. Aubury, “there is a difference, of course. Linnet is now in society, and her manners are beginning to take the finish and self-possession which are necessary for a lady who will frequently have to entertain. I believe Mr. Burstborough is perfectly content.”

And Mrs. Aubury's tone intimated that,

such being the case, nobody else need be otherwise. But Mrs. Polemont would not be silenced.

“Well, I suppose, if he likes it, it is all right. All I can say is that he will marry a very different girl from the one he fell in love with three months ago. Maria, I don’t ask it from curiosity, but as a true friend. *Are* you sure that on her part it is a marriage of the——”

Mrs. Aubury knew only too well what was coming. She was continually haunted now by that question. When Mrs. Polemont and Mrs. Flowerdale and her husband were not asking it, her own conscience was. And the more she assured herself and other people that the engagement was an entirely satisfactory one, the more the dark presence of the lie she was telling overshadowed her.

But still she felt sure that, in the end, it would be all right. Linnet would be comfortable enough with worthy Mr. Burst-

borough, and it would be much better for her to be married and settled at once, than to go through the perils of a long engagement with a man who might after all never be able to afford to marry, except with a good fortune, and that Linnet had not. Besides, she was the very last girl in the world who ought to marry upon anything but ample means ; and, whatever she might think of it now, the time would come when she would be thankful enough to the wisdom which had stepped in to prevent her making a fool of herself. For of all things there was nothing more effectual than a sufficiently lengthened course of poverty, especially when a respectable appearance had to be kept up along with it, to check and starve down the love which at starting thought it could do so much.

So she stopped the inquiry before it was completed, knowing how it was going to end.

“ Isabel dear ! How foolish to be con-

stantly harping upon that. As if Mr. Aubury would ever drive Linnet into anything which was not quite in accordance with her own wishes. You really ought to know him better. He is not the man to exercise that sort of authority, if Linnet was the girl to submit to it. And as for worldliness, or looking out for money, why everyone knows it is the last thing he could be guilty of. You will really make me quite uncomfortable, Isabel, if you say any more about it. As I told you before, Linnet has acted entirely according to the dictates of her own free will."

Mrs. Polemont was silenced. She had not looked at it in that light before. Mrs. Aubury had said well. Her husband was not a man to coerce the affections of any girl who was dependent upon him. And as for Mrs. Aubury herself, having known the miseries of an ill-assorted marriage, she would never suffer another to encounter them, so long as advice of hers

could prevent it. Still less would she use any influence to bring such a marriage about.

The doctor's wife felt she had perhaps gone a little too far. George might have to scold her if he heard about it. He often did have to pull her up in matters of that kind, for she was one who must speak out what she thought about anything, and for a medical man, he said, that was sometimes inconvenient. But, when she went home, she told him that she was quite sure there was something wrong, and that if ever she had pitied anyone in her life before, she pitied the poor young girl who was going to be Mr. Burstborough's wife in less than a month.

CHAPTER VII.

AND indeed Linnet needed all the pity that could be spent upon her. She had now been engaged to Mr. Burstborough three weeks, three of the most horrible weeks she had ever spent. So horrible that, to keep herself from thinking about what was past, present, and to come, she was obliged to plunge into an incessant round of excitement, choking down with balls, dinner-parties, concerts, theatricals, and the display of new dresses attendant upon them, the misery that was slowly eating away her life.

She was now very much in the condi-

tion of the prisoner in the old Venetian story, who, to avoid death in the dungeons of the Doge's palace, chose to pass the remainder of his days in a many-windowed room far out of the city, overlooking a pleasant expanse of hill, and lake, and valley, and woodland, with the domes of fair Venice in the distance. For awhile it was tolerable, better at any rate than the cold waters of the canal. But one morning, pacing up and down his prison room, he noticed a change in it. One of the windows, from which he was accustomed to catch a glimpse of the blue waters of the Adriatic, had disappeared. A week later, the one next it had gone, and his prison was so much smaller. Another week, and the third, looking to the distant domes and campaniles of Venice, was lost. Then, to his horror, he discovered that the end wall of the chamber was gradually moving on. Window after window was shut off. Hill, lake, blue sea, dome, cam-

panile, lagoon, departed one by one, until at last the walls closed upon him, and he was crushed between them.

So it seemed with Linnet. To escape that almost worse than death, wounded love and pride, she had flung herself into the gilded bondage of a promise which bound her for life to a man whose affection she could never return. It was a loss of liberty, but it was better than the blackness and darkness of despair. There were windows in her prison-house, many of them, through which she could yet look out upon the fair landscape of comfort, ease, plenty, even splendour and prosperity. Life within it was, if not noble, still endurable. But now the walls were beginning to close in upon her. One by one, the windows which had let in air and light were disappearing, and the space in which she could move was narrowing, until at last, with pale, sick terror, she found herself in a narrow, sunless cell, whose walls,

the walls she had chosen for herself, were slowly pressing her to death.

It had not seemed so bad at first. She did not love the man she had promised to marry, but it was better to be loved, not loving at all, than to love so much, and not be loved again. That window closed upon her first. To receive, giving nothing in return, made the very thing received first uninteresting and then loathsome. Then there was the outlook of novelty, the pleasurable excitement of being an object of envy to others who would willingly have won what was bestowed upon her. That closed. Like the famous Dorian fruit, so fair to look upon, once opened, it spread its nauseous odour round everything that she touched. Then there was the window of selfish pride, the glory of having power over another, of feeling that her will was law to him, her slightest whim to be sought out and gratified. That closed too. Her enjoyment of this

man's devotion and flattery, like a pool into which much is poured in and nothing ever given out, became stagnant and putrid.

Three weeks after her engagement the mistake and folly of it had made themselves sufficiently known to her. But still there was one window left in her prison-house, the satisfaction of letting Keith Moriston see that she could forget as easily as he could. And Linnet was comforting herself with that now, as captives do with the last streak of light left to them. It was the one thing that her maidenly pride had to feed upon. For all the rest she felt that she had lowered herself. Knowing what was noble, she had taken as her portion the base and low. Turning away from forgiving remembrance, she had clasped hands with anger, and anger had led her to where she stood now, surrounded by the unutterable tedium of common-place, pledged to a future

in which there was not one spark of interest, bound by a promise which touched nothing that was worthy in her, the beloved of an honest, well-meaning, prosperous unit in the mob of mediocrity, whose thoughts were all of things that could be bought with money, and whose attachment was only useful to her as a blind to keep the general public of her friends from finding out that she had ever known what a true and lofty love meant.

So no wonder that Linnet required a good deal of outside gaiety to enable her to keep up appearances, and that her wedding silks needed to be of the best, since the happiness, of which they were supposed to be the earnest, had so little ring of truth in it. But nobody knew, and that was one comfort. People were all congratulating her. And she had a vague sort of hope herself that somehow things might turn out better than she expected. With a curious sort of satisfaction, which

told only too fatally the real state of the case, she found herself listening to Mrs. Aubury's stories of how married people had been very happy who began by not loving each other at all, or, at least, who began, as Linnet was beginning, by the love being all on one side.

For, as the time went on, Mrs. Aubury thought it was just as well to let her hear a conversation of that kind now and then, in case she was not so devoted to Mr. Burstborough as some of her romantic friends—Miss Alvisa, for instance—might think necessary. For certainly she was not devoted, nor did she profess to be, though never a word now was said about that young Moriston; and the exceeding independence and carelessness of her manner towards the gentleman she was so soon to marry might only be another manifestation of that coquetry which had shown itself in such a pretty, fascinating way,

when first she began to go into society. And indeed it was just as well for a girl not to be devoted at first. It was much better for the weight of the attachment to be on the other side. And a sensible wife could always be comfortable with a steady, honourable man like Mr. Burstborough, who could give, in addition to steadiness and honour, so many other material advantages.

Mrs. Aubury need not have feared Miss Alvisa's influence. Linnet very seldom went now to the old house by the church. The wedding preparations, which were being hurried on so rapidly, afforded a sufficient excuse for not keeping up a great intimacy there. And the place was associated with a past so sweet that she felt now to have kept it only as a memory would have been her truest wisdom. She always hurried away through that little bit of the dingle where she could see

across to the beech-tree on the old vicarage lawn, and the dangling swing-ropes, and the garden-chair on which Miss Alvisa had been lying that morning, when she went across to read the old King Arthur book with her.

For those pleasant readings were quite done with now. There was no longer any Sangreal for her, nor any longing to go forth in quest of it; for she had lost that singleness of heart to which alone the Holy Grail could be revealed; and feasting in the castle hall was for her henceforth,—feasting with the lazy, full-fed ones, not going forth for brave endeavour with the noble. To read that chapter of Sir Galahad again, as once she and Miss Alvisa had read it together, tears of longing springing from her heart to her eyes as she read, Linnet could but laugh with scorn at herself as she remembered it. She had been so young and foolish then, and she had thought it all so true; and to

suffer with the searching few had seemed so far better than to be fed with the feasting many. But now she had altered all that, and, except in hours of dreaded silence and solitude, when the past would thrust itself up again through all the wedding silks and finery which muffled it down, she could laugh at the old story too, and scorn herself for ever having believed it.

And even when she could not laugh, even when she had to own to herself the foul wrong she had done, she could comfort herself by the thought that she had done it because of the sin of another. Upon Keith Moriston's head lay the blame, at his door the sin of this death of all that had once been good in her. Had he but been true, nothing had ever made her false. Had he given her even a little, she could have given him all, and in that giving have risen to such a worthy height. For it once was there, she knew it was, the longing after a

far-off pure ideal, the strife to put down what was mean and foolish, the noble discontent with what she had already attained to, the will firmly set to reach what Sir Galahad had reached, to see what he saw, that perfect will of God, which, once being seen, frees the soul to heaven, that heaven born of death of self.

And now she had done with it all, and the weeks, as they went on, crusted her more and more satisfactorily with that fine varnish of fashion which people wondered at, but decided at length that it was only the result of being thrust so suddenly out of the quiet of home into the splendour of society, combined perhaps with a natural feeling of pride in being the chosen one of such a prosperous man as Mr. Burstborough.

And such was Linnet, and such the life she had chosen for herself, when Mrs. Polemont came to spend a long afternoon

at the castle, for the purpose chiefly of seeing the wedding silks, which were, as Mrs. Aubury said, so perfectly lovely.

CHAPTER VIII.

LINNET, not caring to hear what the doctor's wife had to say about her marriage preparations, proposed to her brother that they should go for a long walk over the moors beyond the castle farm.

"We shall not have many more together," he said, as they crossed the stile which led out of the dingle path into a bit of bridle road, and thence to the great upward sweep of moorland, on the summit of which was a little bit of woody knoll, from whence such a fine prospect was to be had of Broadminster and Mr. Burst-

borough's new house. "But I am very well content, child, if you are going to be happy."

"Of course, I shall be all right, brother Owen; you need not be uncomfortable about me. Mr. Burstborough is a very good sort of man."

"A very good sort of man indeed, Linnet. I would never have trusted you with him, even though he is your own choice, if I had not felt sure that you would be quite safe. I believe he will make you a most unexceptionable husband."

Linnet had heard that phrase so often before. Mrs. Aubury, and the vicar's wife, and Mrs. Polemont, and the Miss Laudervilles, and Mr. Flowerdale had all said to her at one time or another since her engagement that Mr. Burstborough would make a most unexceptionable husband. As if to have a good income, and a commodious house, and a tolerably comely person, and not to be fond of gambling or

drinking, was all one could require from the man one was to live one's life with. But then, as her brother said, he was her own choice. There was something in that. He had not been forced upon her—at least, not by any outward compulsion. Of the inward compulsion no one knew. She might perhaps be fortunate enough to keep that to herself all the way through.

“It is a curious world, Linnet,” said her brother, after a long silence, during which she had been hurrying him along up the rugged moorland path so rapidly that he had scarcely breath to speak. She had taken off her hat and flung her hair back, and she would go climbing along in front, stopping now and then with face uplifted to the tearing November wind, waiting for him to reach her, then off again to a fresh ascent. And so, at last, they had reached the bit of knoll where, three weeks before, Mr. Burstborough had asked her to accept

him and his house and all the rest of his advantages.

Linnet was not sorry for them to stay there. She wanted something to cover up the memory of what had happened under the shade of those now almost leafless beeches. She had never been up there since the day of the picnic. Mr. Burstborough, whose associations with the spot were pleasanter than her own, had often proposed to take her, but she had always found some excuse for suggesting a different walk. She felt as if alone there with him she could not bear to go over the past again. Now, talking quietly with brother Owen—the brother whose care and tenderness had blessed all her life—and talking with him, perhaps for the last time, as the child whose shelter he alone provided, fresh associations would gather round the place. It would stand up as a landmark between herself and her girlish

life—the life which brother Owen had taken such thought for; not between herself and that other richer, rarer life, which sprang up so beautifully, and then by her own will had been cast away for ever.

Her brother was resting against one of the old beech-trees. Linnet, who could have climbed a dozen Alps if so there had been any possibility of tiring herself beyond remembrance of the past, stood beside him with not a pulse quickened.

“Brother Owen, what makes you say it is a curious world? What has happened?”

“Nothing, Linnet; nothing just now. It is only the things which are always going on happening, and how different they are from the things we would have, if the happening was in our own keeping.”

“Are you thinking of me, brother Owen? Did you not intend me to marry Mr. Burstborough?”

“Oh! dear, no, Linnet. I was not thinking of that at all. As I said before, I

have no doubt Mr. Burstborough will make you a most unexceptionable husband. What I have seen of him during the last three weeks leads me to be more than ever satisfied about that. I was thinking of quite other things, which perhaps you will never be able to understand. Better still if there is never any need for you to understand them."

And Mr. Aubury looked away down the steep moorland path which they had climbed, to the old house by the church, where Miss Alvisa lived her quiet life, more blessed in its patient loneliness than he in the portion of goods which had fallen to him; Miss Alvisa, from whom he was so far parted now, and he could never tell her why, never justify to her what he knew she held for change and want of faith. How little she knew! How little Maria, calmly self-assertive, despotic, and selfish as he had found her to be, knew what a tangle it all was! And yet people had to

go on smiling, and being pleasant, and looking as if they were quite contented with everything; and underneath it they were only waiting for the end, hoping on against hope that some day things would right themselves. And so they would sooner or later, but the someday would not be here.

Still Owen Aubury's look was the look of a man who, far down below the comings and goings of things that stir the surface of life, has a rock to rest upon. On his face was the seal of peace, pressed by the hand of a good conscience. And, if there was regret, there was no self-reproach. He had never been other than true to what he felt was the best for him of duty. Where it led, he followed. And so, through whatever of gloom he had to travel, there was this light at the end, that not his own, but another's will had made the path.

And so these two, brother and sister, the past of each hidden from the other, looked down on the house round which both their thoughts brooded, the house where Miss Alvisa suffered and was silent, the house from which Keith Moriston had gone out, hoping, as he said, never to come into it again.

"I am sorry it happened so," said Mr. Aubury at last, rousing himself as if from a reverie.

"What happened so, brother Owen?"

"That Keith Moriston could not do as he once intended: could not stay for a long time with Miss Alvisa. It has pained her very much. It seems almost to have brought up a shadow of mistrust between them. I never thought of that. It never occurred to me that what happened would affect anyone but himself. But it is always so. One cannot do anything without its effect going on and on indefinitely.

It is the thought of this which makes action so difficult when one is not thoroughly convinced of the right way."

"What do you mean, brother?" said Linnet, who was not accustomed to hear him talk in this speculative, disjointed way. "Who has been affected by anything?"

Mr. Aubury did not reply for a little while.

"Let us stay here and talk it over," he said at last.

They turned towards the shelter of the trees, away from the Broadminster side, where the wind was sweeping down upon them, away from the willow holt, beyond which the façade of Mr. Burstborough's new mansion formed such a conspicuous object in the foreground of the landscape, and seated themselves on a heathery bank, from which they could look down the dingle-path to where a little bit of rippling brightness, clearly seen now through the thinning autumn leaves, showed Linnet

the spot where she and Keith Moriston had first met.

"I think perhaps I ought to tell you about it. I have never been quite certain that it was right not to have mentioned it to you earlier," Mr. Aubury began, in that stumbling, hesitating manner which was always so noticeable in him when he could not clearly see his way through anything. "But I do not think it can make any difference now. At least, it ought not to make any difference. And I do not know how you could have been kept in ignorance of it always."

Something had happened to Mr. Burstborough, thought Linnet. Some of his contracts or speculations had gone wrong. She had heard people say that these business men had great ups and downs; to-day rich, to-morrow poor. Perhaps Mr. Burstborough was poor now. And she said, quickly and decidedly,

"Oh! no, it ought not to make any

difference. And it will not make any difference, brother Owen, not any difference at all."

For if any money difficulty had arisen to make her marriage with Mr. Burstborough not so desirable after all, and if on that account her brother thought she would like to withdraw from it,—though it was not like Owen to think of such a thing,—he was quite mistaken. If anything could brighten the dreariness of the future, it would be the knowledge that she was not accepting quite so much temporal good in place of the spiritual nothing which she had to give. Something of that sort would even matters a little. If Mr. Burstborough had been reduced from his spacious mansion to a four-roomed cottage, she would have respected herself much more in going to it as his wife; and she would have gone, too, all the same.

Her brother turned and looked at her. She had said it would make no difference.

Then she did understand a little of what he wished to say to her. If so, it was all right. Probably she had gained some idea from Miss Alvisa, who of course had heard the whole from Keith Moriston himself. And in that case he could be doing no harm by telling her what really had taken place. It was better to know all than a part.

“No, Linnet, it can make no difference. I should be very sorry to think that it could make any. Yet I have always had a little feeling that it might, and so it is a relief to me to hear you say so decidedly that your own mind is fixed. Things happen strangely, but we must not think they happen by chance. It would be a dreary world if they did.”

Owen Aubury's glance went back to the old house by the church, and for a few minutes he was silent, Linnet busying herself meanwhile by thinking how she would try to be a good wife to Mr. Burst-

borough in that four-roomed cottage somewhere, making up by economy and thrift, and a sort of housekeeperly cheerfulness, for the better things which she could never give him. With the very thought there came a gleam of self-respect. It was little to do for the man who was giving her all he had to give, but it was better than nothing.

“Then shall I tell you all, Linnet?”

“Oh! yes, brother Owen, tell me everything. You need not be in the least afraid. It will make no difference to me, none at all. You shall see that. Besides, you know, it is all settled. I really would not alter anything now.”

“Very well. It was soon after Mr. Burstborough wrote to me to ask me if he might speak to you on the matter of the engagement. You know now how that letter was answered. I believed him to be then what I still more believe him to be now, an honourable and straightfor-

ward man, and, if you were able to give him what he asked, there was no necessity for me, as your legal guardian, to place any obstacle in the way of your marriage. It was not his money that influenced me at all."

"No," said Linnet, proudly. "And it is not the loss of it that would influence *me*. Whether Mr. Burstborough be rich or poor, it is all one to me now."

"I am glad to hear you say that, child." And Mr. Aubury laid his hand caressingly on Linnet's. She did love this substantial, common-place man then. Something in him, quite apart from the beautiful home he could give her, had found its way to her heart. And, that being so, what he had to say about Keith Moriston would matter little. Still it was better for her to know it, and he should feel then that he had done his duty.

"It would be a poor thing, Linnet, if what one professed to give for love could

be taken back because wealth had failed. But I do not think you will be tried in that way, though it is well you should feel it all the same. And now I will go on about Keith Moriston."

"Keith Moriston?" And Linnet looked up into her brother's face. "What has Keith Moriston to do with it?"

"Nothing at all, child, now, since I have your own word that it can make no difference to you. I only want to tell you what happened. Well, you know, I gave Mr. Burstborough leave to come and plead his cause with you, telling him that I should leave the result in your own hands. You did not appear, to my wife and myself, to be unfavourably disposed towards him, indeed rather the contrary, or else I would not have made him welcome to the house. It was only a few days later that Keith Moriston wrote to me from Scotland, to ask the same favour which I had just granted to Mr. Burstborough."

"To ask what?" said Linnet, vaguely.

"To ask if he also might plead his own cause with you. He said ever since he first saw you it had been his hope one day to win you for his wife. He was then expecting to come and stay for at least a month with Miss Alvisa, and he asked if he might have my sanction to his love for you."

"Yes," said Linnet, seeing that her brother paused for her reply. And she said it very quietly.

"Mr. Burstborough had not spoken to you then, but your manner towards him was increasingly such as to make us believe that you favoured him. And, such being the case, my wife did not think it would be honourable to him to give the same permission to another. And so she wrote to Mr. Moriston, telling him of the circumstances, and saying that he had better not think anything more about it. That was all. Of course it accounted for

his very brief visit to Miss Alvisa. I have felt much pained for her. I never thought that she would feel it so deeply. Indeed I may say that the thought of any difference to her never entered my mind. Though, if it had, I still should not have been justified in acting otherwise."

"Is that all, brother Owen?"

"Yes, that is all. I have often wondered whether you ought to have been told about it from the beginning, but it is difficult to have a clear impression of one's duty in such things. And Maria thought it was better not. You have decided now by saying that it could make no possible difference to you. I am very glad of that."

Linnet listened as if in a dream. Very slowly the meaning of it all dawned upon her. Keith Moriston loved her. Keith Moriston had sought her for his wife. And this was November, and some time before Christmas she was to marry Mr. Burstborough.

Indeed, indeed, as she had said, it could make no difference. She could only stay there in her prison house, the last light now departed from it, and wait until its walls, slowly closing in upon her, crushed her soul to death.

“Thank you, brother Owen. I am much obliged to you for telling me. I think, as you say, it was better for me to know it, even though everything is settled now. I suppose Mr. Moriston knows?”

“Yes. He was told as much as might lead him to infer that, though of course nothing definite was said.”

“Very well. Shall we go home now?”

And home they went, through the wild sweeping moorland wind, which now brought no more colour to Linnet's cheeks, no more light to her eyes, than though it had been beating upon a marble statue. Coming into the house, she heard Mrs. Polemont's pleasant voice discussing the wedding preparations, and she had hurried

away to her room to get such miserable quiet there as she could. But even that was not to be hers, for Mrs. Aubury had bidden her downstairs, and then came that passionate outbreak of tears, and then silence of exhaustion, and in the evening Mr. Burstborough made his appearance as usual, and, with such excuses as were possible, she accounted to him for the weariness she could no longer hide, and listened to his kindly words and heavy attempts at comfort. And not until far into the night could she be alone with this new horror which had come into her life, and which made the darkness of the last few weeks, terrible as that had seemed, almost as daylight in comparison.

CHAPTER IX.

AS she had said to her brother, it could make no difference. Everything must go on just the same. No one had forced her to do what was done. Of her own free will she had laid her hand in the hand of the man who was to hold it all the rest of the way.

All that night, and until the slow November light crept in through her closed blinds, Linnet lay awake, and thought and wept. But no thoughts and no tears could change either the past or present. Truly she thought she had had much to sorrow over before in that the love she

had given, not without most sweet asking, had been so rudely flung back upon her. But even that sorrow was as joy laid side by side with this that stabbed her now, and had to be borne so quietly. Her love had not been flung away. Keith Moriston had not been unfaithful to her. And yet she must walk for ever apart from him.

Oh! had she but listened to the voice which spoke to her of patience and remembrance, just before, with such a storm of passion at her heart, she tore up and flung away that mossy record of her love, which was lying now, rotting and illegible, under the quiet waters of the swan-pool! If she had but waited a little while, and been true to what she dimly felt to be the best, all this would never have come upon her. For what would once have brought such a glory into her life, the knowledge of Keith Moriston's faithfulness, came now to blacken it as with the darkness of the grave—came now to make impossible any,

even the feeblest, beginnings of content—came now only to tell her how false and cruel was the lie to which she had bound herself, and how another's peace, as well as her own, had been blasted by her haste to be revenged.

All was done, and done for nothing—done for worse than nothing. There only remained to sit down and look cheerful, whilst everyone congratulated her upon her prospects.

“If I could only die!” she said to herself, as wearily, on that November morning, she rose and prepared for another day in which she must smile and be bright as usual, and discuss the approaching marriage arrangements, and decide the important question of bridesmaids, how many there should be, and what they should wear, and in what order they should walk up the church, on whose wedding splendours a decoration committee was even now sitting, three weeks being the least

possible time that could be given to the arrangement of anything so effective as those ropes of evergreen and scarlet-berried holly were to be—"if I could only die!"

But it takes a great deal of heart-break to make a strong girl of eighteen die,—a girl who has spent her life out in the wild free moorland air, and won from it that firmness of muscle and brightness of eye, and rich store of vitality, which, when death of all else comes, goes living on still, with not so much as a pulse lowered. It must be something more definite than heart-break. Not one day nor many days of bitter disappointment will do it, or even so hollow the cheek and pale the eye that friends need begin to be anxious. Next morning Linnet looked pretty much as usual. The quietness of her manner was only what Mrs. Aubury expected, after the outburst of the previous afternoon.

She was ashamed of herself—that was the simple truth.

And so she was. Very much ashamed of herself, but not in the way that Mrs. Aubury thought. Her self-reproach was for the miserable lie which she was telling day by day, a lie which was giving such complete satisfaction to the mistress of Castle Florey, a lie which would be the means of keeping Keith Moriston, with all his unpleasantly possible information about Airdrie Muir, at a safe distance from the village, and which would hasten the time when fair face and loving ways would be no longer there to win from Mr. Aubury the tenderness which she felt to be her right, and hers alone.

Linnet, smiling on as best she could, hoped that perhaps Mr. Burstborough would find out that she did not care very much for him. But Mr. Burstborough was not a man to find out anything of the

sort. He was of that comfortable, tough temperament which neither perceives readily nor looks for unpleasant change. He loved Linnet a great deal more now than he did at first, spite of her wilful, careless, independent ways. His love was beginning to have that effect upon him which all honest love has: it was making him humble, slow to think any more of what he could give in the shape of house and income, and furniture and pin-money; quicker to think of the much that was given to him—for he still took it as given—in the love of the bright young girl who had laid her happiness in his hand. And if sometimes she did vex him by a little more sauciness than usual, and showed him rather too plainly that she was not prepared just yet to be all meekness and submission, Mrs. Aubury, who feared nothing so much as the breaking off of the engagement, was ready to comfort him by explaining that it was only Linnet's way.

She was perhaps getting a little spoiled by too much admiration, but it would all come right when she had once settled down into the quiet routine of married life. At any rate then his would be the authority to check anything which was not quite agreeable to him, and Linnet was a girl of far too much sense to persist in a course of conduct which would compromise either her own self-respect or her husband's happiness. There was no need to fear. And Mr. Burstborough, his love deepening with his newly developing humility, yet lacking the fine perception which often brings more sorrow than joy to those who have it, was comforted accordingly, whilst poor Linnet was tormented.

But one day, about a week after that moorland walk with her brother, she went over to see Miss Alvisa. A visit now and then was a thing that had to be gone through out of common respect, though Miss Alvisa scarcely knew the self-possessed

young lady of society who chatted awhile about weather and wedding-dresses, and then took her departure, for the impetuous girl of six months before, who had been wont to tell out every thought that came into her life. But, since that moorland walk, Owen Aubury had been over to the old house by the church, and had told what happened then, and of Linnet's strange outbreak of passionate tears. And Miss Alvisa, though saying nothing, had thought much. A light had come, the light she had been waiting for so long. It showed her why such a change had passed upon Linnet. It showed her, too, on the brink of what a fatal precipice the girl was walking.

So long as she thought Keith Moriston did not care for her, her pride had held her up, and for the sake of that she had been doing and daring with such foolhardiness, crusting herself over with an outside show of ease, whilst within the fire of

anger and wounded love was smouldering. But now that pride could help her no longer. Instead of it there could only be the remorse of wrong-doing, remorse which even yet might not come too late. How out of the wretched tangle into which Linnet's wilfulness had brought her—for Miss Alvisa as yet only knew of the wilfulness, not of Mrs. Aubury's part in it—any way of escape could be found was a problem. But seeing now even a little into her heart, knowing what she suffered, and how she had been misled, by her own righteous anger against what she believed to be dis-faith on Keith Moriston's part, into the acceptance of a love for which she cared less than nothing, which was every day becoming more distasteful to her, Miss Alvisa felt that, whatever else came to pass, that marriage, whose preparations were speeding on so fast, must not.

“Linnet, come here and sit by me,” she said. as the girl, with a cool, absent sort of

unconcern, offered her morning greeting, and then began to talk of some indifferent matter. "I have wanted you for a long time."

She asked no question, she searched for no new story in the young face that was quickly bent over her for a kiss, and then as quickly withdrawn. Only, as Linnet took the little stool and placed it by the sofa, her seat of old time, Miss Alvisa put her arms round her, and clasped her cold hand, and little by little, with still no word spoken between them, Linnet, who at first had held herself steadily upright, yielded to the silent influence, and let herself lean upon the stronger-hearted woman, and soon a current of sympathy was passing from the great, quiet nature to the weak, suffering one.

"Linnet," she said, "I almost think I know."

They were the very words she had used when Mr. Aubury came, four months ago,

to tell her of his approaching marriage. More truly than she read his thoughts then, she read Linnet's now.

Tears were rolling silently down the girl's face, blessed tears, for she felt a door of hope was being opened. It seemed as if those prison walls, which had so nearly met and crushed her, were slowly moving back again, nay, breaking apart to let the sunshine through. For where Miss Alvisa's sympathy reached, her help seldom failed to reach too.

And still neither of them spoke a word. Only Linnet's fingers moved from time to time in that firm, quiet clasp, and that blessed rain of tears was breaking down the barriers of proud reserve, and at last the girl was able to let another see the grief that was eating out her life.

"You need not tell me, Linnet. I think I know it all. And it is better to live a lonely life and a true one, than to take the best that love and wealth can give, and be

false. Is it the lonely life, or the other, that you are afraid of, Linnet?"

"The other," said Linnet, with a brave determination in her voice. "It is the false one that I dare not live."

"Then, child, it will never be given to you to live. Only upon those who choose it is the door of falsehood locked. Wait and be patient. You must never be Mr. Burstborough's wife, and you never shall be."

Linnet went home. Mrs. Aubury was sitting, as usual, at her work in the chapel-room, as warm now as soft rugs, and crimson curtains, and a glowing fire could make it.

"Mr. Burstborough has just been in, Linnet. He was disappointed not to find you at home. He is gone over the moor for a few hours' shooting, and will be back early in the afternoon. He wanted to ask you about some alterations he is having made in the drawing-room at the Willows.

Of course he decides nothing until he has had your opinion about it. I could not tell him where you had gone. Now that there are so many things to attend to, Linnet, it would be better if you always left word with the servants where you are to be found."

"Very well," said the girl, quietly.

And, going to her seat in the window, she took out a piece of embroidery which was to be part of her wedding finery, and began to work at it. She knew now it would never be wanted, yet she worked on mechanically. How the change was to come, she knew not; but come it would, if only she could be patient and wait.

That morning Miss Alvisa sent over for Mr. Aubury, and told him all she knew. It was plain enough. He wondered he had never discovered it before. Linnet and Keith Moriston loved each other. When Keith found that he might not tell his love, he would not come at all, and

Linnet, knowing nothing, thought he had forgotten, and so let herself accept the proposals Mr. Burstborough made, coming as they did just when wounded pride was goading her to anything which might show Keith Moriston that she did not care for him. Now, too late, she had learned her mistake.

“And is it so well to live a loveless life that you can stand by and let her do it, Owen?” said Miss Alvisa, looking steadily from those clear, thoughtful eyes into the face of the man who should have been her husband.

Owen met the glance with one as clear and unfaltering. Linnet’s heart she had read, but not his own. And he would not, at the cost of his wife’s peace, clear himself of disloyalty to the woman of his choice. It was the noblest sacrifice he could make, this keeping back of the truth for the sake of the one he loved not, though it laid him in the dust before the

one he loved. And this was the man whom people called so undecided, this the man whom Alvisa Clerehart pitied a little, even while she loved him, because she thought that his truth had failed in that long, long waiting where hers had stood so steadfastly.

• “Good-bye, Alvisa. Thank you for telling me. I will see that what is just to both of them shall be done.”

And he went home, Miss Alvisa watching him with tears in her eyes. But it would be well with Linnet now.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN Mr. Aubury once knew that a thing ought to be done, he did it, let who might oppose him. It was the satisfying himself about the doing or not doing which was the hard thing.

And he knew his wife would bitterly oppose anything which would come between Linnet and this marriage upon which she had set her mind so from the beginning. Therefore he did what was necessary to be done without taking her into account at all. People might say—a few, Mrs. Flowerdale amongst them, did say—that Mr. Aubury was a hen-pecked husband, but they did not know how

quietly he could take his own way, treading over any hot ploughshares of contention and contradiction when the thing to be reached was right, and lay clearly before him.

Coming home from the old house by the church, he called Linnet to him.

"Linnet, when is Mr. Burstborough to be here again, to-day or to-morrow?"

"This afternoon," she said, looking straightforwardly at him, with eyes that had neither love nor longing in them, nor shyness, but only patient waiting.

"Linnet, do you love him?"

"No, brother Owen."

And Linnet's eyes fell now for thought of all the wrong that she had done.

"Linnet, do not answer me unless you like. But, if you had known Keith Moriston had asked you for his wife, would it have made any difference?"

"Yes, brother Owen, it would have made *all* the difference."

"Is that so now?"

"Yes, it is so now."

"Then, child, you shall never marry Mr. Burstborough."

"How can I not? I have given him my promise."

"Linnet," and her brother made her look up at him again, "you have given him no promise. You have told him an untruth. He is a true man, and an honourable. He will not bind you to a lie. Nor must you be true to a lie, though it was what you thought the lie of another that drove you to tell it."

For there was this difference between the noble untruth which Owen Aubry was living and the ignoble lie which his young girl was going to lock fast into her future: that he was living it, at the cost of his own peace, for the peace and honour of another which he held to be dearer to her than his to him. And Linnet's was the lie of anger, and to live it through

would be to make her life a deceit.

“Brother Owen, I have done it, and I must suffer.”

“And you *will* suffer, Linnet,” said Owen Aubury, sadly, yet gently. “Go to your own room and leave the rest to me.”

Linnet went.

Sitting at her casement window, from which, when the summer leaves around it were at their greenest, she had watched for the coming of Keith Moriston up the dingle path, she watched now for the man who had her future life in his hands, who could, if he would, give her back to peace and freedom, or who could compel her to that she had promised, or, if she refused to abide by it, could give her name to be the scoff and talk of the town. But better others should scoff at her than that she should scoff at herself. Better death, better scorn, better loneliness, better anything than the miserable untruth of calling any other man her husband, whilst

Keith Moriston held her heart as he held it now.

Mr. Burstborough came up the path—came with the complacent, substantial, business-like tread she had learned to know so well, and to shrink from so pitifully. He always had the comfortable appearance of a man for whom the world has gone prosperously, who has had his way made easy for him, alike in railway contracts and contracts of a more romantic sort. But now why should he not look a little more elated than usual, his happiness being so near, the preparations for it almost complete, scarcely anything, indeed, unfinished but the church decorations, and that yellow satin drawing-room furniture about which he was coming to learn her opinion?

No, not to learn her opinion. To learn something very different.

And then a cold dull pain fastened upon Linnet's conscience as she looked upon his

broad smiling face down there beneath her casement window, and thought of what he was coming so cheerfully to meet. Even the knowledge of her falseness and deceit.

For the first time she realised a little of what it would be to him. It had never yet occurred to her that what was a door of hope to herself must be a door of despair to him; that what she had suffered when Keith Moriston had seemed to betray her, Mr. Burstborough must suffer when she really betrayed him. For why should he not? He had given her as much as she had given to the man whose disloyalty to it had cost her so sore a pain. And that disloyalty was small compared with this.

It was a new element in the humiliation through which she must pass. She rose and paced up and down the room, her face hidden in her hands. She heard Mr. Burstborough's step in the hall; then his cheery voice; then there was silence.

What was said she never knew. But, an hour later, the man who had come to her brother's door eager, elated, bright with the consciousness of an honest and happy love, left it with bowed head and drooping shoulders, and the worn, sad look of a man upon whom a great grief has fallen. And all for falseness of hers.

And then there came the keenest pang that in all these weeks of agony Linnet had known. She had wrought this terrible pain upon him. She had bowed the head and dimmed the eyes and taken all hope's spring from the step of him who had done her no wrong—who, instead of doing her any wrong, had had it in his heart to do her only good all through her life. Asking nothing from her but her love, he had given her all he had—wealth, home, affection, position. And this was what she had done in return. This was her gratitude to the man for whom her smile had once been his sunshine, her will

his law, her least little wish his care until it was fulfilled, to drive him forth from her door with the sorrow upon his face which this man now was bearing for her sake.

Linnet covered her face and wept aloud. Truly her sin had found her out. Truly her brother had well said,

“Linnet, you *will* suffer.”

Again she lifted her face. If he had but been going away with the bearing of a man who was justly angry and disdainful! If there had been scorn and passion in his look—if he had, as it were, shaken off the very dust from his feet as a testimony against her and her falseness, then she could have borne it better. But it was his hopeless sorrow which cut her to the quick. And just before the ivy-covered ramparts beyond the castle tower hid him from view, he turned for one look upon the house which once held so much for him, and which he was now leaving for

ever. And Linnet could scarcely know him for the same.

Tears, the bitterest she had ever shed, scalded her cheeks for this man whom she had wronged. Almost again she could have renewed her useless vow, have promised to esteem, to respect, anything but to love the man who was suffering so sorely for her sake. She longed to fling herself at his feet, and beg his forgiveness—nay, almost to offer to be his again, if so she could have forgiven herself, if so she could have cooled the burning pain of her tears.

And yet there was hope in them, for they came from the consciousness of wrongdoing, and that consciousness was the point at which she turned back again to peace. She had made a great mistake. She had listened to the voice which bade her avenge, instead of that which bade her lovingly remember the past. Now she was doing

what she could to retrieve that mistake. Back again, with burnt and wounded feet, she was travelling over the hot ashes of her folly, content to suffer, so only she could again be true to herself and the right, content to lose for ever the brightness and hope of the past, so only she might win the calm of a good conscience, and find herself once more amongst the fellowship of those who, with a pure heart, followed the highest, and rested not until it was theirs.

But, though at last she had made her escape out of the desolation into which her falsehood had driven her, that other—the one whom she had led into it—was there still. And could there be any content, could there be any real peace for her, whilst that other was cursing her in his thoughts? Linnet's heart uttered a deep *no*. Whilst he walked alone, she could never clasp hands with another. Whilst

he suffered for the wrong she had done, she must suffer too. The deepest instincts of right and justice within her forbade anything like ease to herself, whilst the consequences of her folly remained to be borne by the victim of them. Only thus could she make amends. Freedom she had won at last, but it was freedom to sorrow over her sin, not freedom to go out again into the sunlight, and take for herself the best she could find there.

Whilst this resolve was steadyng itself within her, Owen Aubury came up to her room. His face was full of pain. It was as if years of trouble had gone over him, too. Linnet dare scarcely meet his look. Never had she seemed to herself so worthy of scorn and reproach.

But he had neither for her. He came to her as she sat there, with her face hidden, the bitter tears streaming down her cheeks, and, laying his hands gently upon her, he only said,

“Linnet, you have done very wrong, and you have suffered much. It is over now.”

CHAPTER XI.

DARK was the thunder-cloud which settled upon Mrs. Aubury's face when told that Mr. Burstborough, entering Florey Castle that afternoon as Linnet's lover, so soon to be her husband, had left it an hour later, never to return: the engagement broken, all between them as though it had never been. And this because, with a folly incomprehensible under the circumstances, Mr. Aubury had told her of Keith Moriston's proposals, and so roused a former fancy which, had it only been let alone, would quietly have slept itself to death.

This done, too, without consent of hers asked or sought. In the mere turning out of a table, or the buying of a new chair, such independence would have been unpardonable, but in a matter involving her own comfort—and that, after all, was the light in which she viewed Linnet's speedy marriage—it meant rebellion, which must be stamped out at once, at whatever cost.

Had Mr. Aubury's untimely disclosures aroused a wild hope in the girl's mind that, if Mr. Burstborough were dismissed, Keith Moriston would come forward again? Or had she wearied him at last with her careless, independent ways? Or was it a lover's quarrel about some trifling matter? Or had there been some misunderstanding at the last on money matters?

"But, whatever it may have been, Owen," she said, with dignity, as she and her husband sat together after dinner, Linnet remaining out of reach of the storm in her own room. "Whatever it may have

been, Owen, I insist on Mr. Burstborough's being recalled at once by a letter of the most ample apology. His affection for Linnet is far too deep to be destroyed by even such an unmerited insult as this."

"Unmerited it is, Maria. Linnet is prepared to own that, and to abide by the consequences of it. But what has been done, will not be undone now."

"Indeed, Owen, it must be." And Mrs. Aubury's temper began to show signs of ascendancy over that usually quiet, self-assertive manner of hers. "It must be explained to him that my views on the subject were never asked for. I will not be so completely ignored upon a matter of moment. A matter, too, which so nearly touches my own comfort."

"How touches it, Maria?"

"Owen, you know very well how Linnet's presence in this house touches my comfort. Whilst she is here I have not from you that first consideration

which is my due. That I have never mentioned it before is not because I have failed to notice it. I have been very patient, because I felt that the time was short; but, now that yourself and your step-sister have taken the management of her affairs so entirely into your own hands, I feel it my duty to inform you that either she leaves Florey Castle or I do."

"That can easily be arranged, Maria," said Mr. Aubury, his countenance not changing in the least as he said it. "Miss Alvisa wished from the first that Linnet should live with her. She can go to-morrow, if you like. It may be more comfortable for us all now for her to do so."

But that was not Mrs. Aubury's intention at all. Linnet would only go to Miss Alvisa's house to meet Keith Moriston. And meeting Keith Moriston now meant becoming engaged to him. And becoming engaged to him meant that sundry matters

connected with her own early life would be brought to the front in a manner which would effectually compromise her position amongst the well-bred people of Abbot's Florey. For, of course, now that Mr. Moriston knew what her behaviour towards himself had been, he would not hesitate to repeat anything which he might happen to know to her disadvantage. And if Mrs. Flowerdale once got hold of the merest thread, she would never rest until she had penetrated to the very centre of the labyrinth. Whereas if Mr. Moriston could be kept at a safe distance,—and he was at a safe distance now,—things as regarded herself might go on just as they were.

“Linnet shall not go to Miss Alvisa's, Owen. Such a step would proclaim at once to the neighbourhood that something unpleasant had taken place, and I wish to shield her as much as possible from the consequences of both her folly and yours.

No ; Mr. Burstborough must be recalled, and, if no one else has the courage to do it, I have."

And Mrs. Aubury rose and seated herself at her writing-table, acting upon her maxim that when a thing had to be done it had better be done at once.

But her husband acted upon that maxim too, sometimes. When he knew what he had to do, there was never any needless delay in the doing of it, and in the doing of it with a strong hand, too. It was very rarely that his love of peace gave way to the necessity of determined action ; but, when it did, that gentle, and, as some people thought, vacillating manner of his girded itself into cast-iron firmness. That he had shielded his wife all these months, and would so shield her to the end, from the humiliation which would come upon her did she know the circumstances of their engagement, and that he shielded her at the expense of cruel misunder-

standing of himself by the one woman whose love he prized, showed that he was not a weak man, where the right had once revealed itself to him.

“My dear Maria,” he said, quietly closing the desk which she had just opened, “it is no use writing to Mr. Burstborough. He will never again come to this house by my consent as Linnet’s lover.”

“May I ask why, Mr. Aubury?”

“You may, Maria.”

Mrs. Aubury began to feel uncertain of her ground. She was seeing her husband in quite a new light. She did not think he had so much power of resistance in him. She had never yet come into actual collision with him, never got far enough down through the yielding surface of his character to find the rock beneath, a rock which neither passion nor persistence could blast.

“Then, Mr. Aubury, I *do* ask. Why is not Mr. Burstborough to be recalled?”

"Because Linnet has been able, before it was too late, to confess to herself how lowering and untrue is the part she has been acting ever since she promised to be his wife."

Mrs. Aubury sneered politely.

"Dear me! I was not aware your young sister lived upon such a lofty moral platform. It is a thousand pities she did not find out her incapacity to perform before she made any promise at all. It strikes me that that was the most lowering and untrue part of the affair. But of course I do not pretend to judge."

"No, Maria. You did that at the beginning, and did it too soon."

"What do you mean, Owen? What have I done?"

"We have both of us been to blame, Maria. If we had left Linnet more free, or rather had left circumstances more free for her, it would have been better."

"Well, Owen, all I can say is that *you*

wrote the letter to Mr. Burstborough, giving him leave to do what he could for himself."

"I did, Maria, and I am very sorry that I yielded to your judgment in doing so. The blame is more mine than yours, for I ought to have had courage enough to oppose a thing which I could not see to be clearly right. We take a very dangerous step when we put ourselves in the place of providence to other people."

"Well, Owen, if you look at it in that way, I have nothing more to say."

"Then it is all right, Maria, for there is nothing more to be said. The thing is done."

"I am not so sure of that, Owen. And the way in which you attempt to fling the blame upon me is excessively annoying. I can conscientiously say that I desired Linnet's happiness, and I desire it still."

"So do I. And our mistake has been in not treating her with more confidence.

We ought to have told her of Keith Moriston's letter, and then have left her free to act for herself. It is the withholding of that which has caused all the mischief."

Mrs. Aubury put on an expression of aggrieved loftiness as she returned to her seat by the fire.

"Owen, I cannot agree to what you say, but I feel that in this matter I have been deeply injured, and I have the right to demand an apology."

"For what, Maria?"

Maria could not exactly say for what, but she felt that a general apologetical attitude all round was the least she could expect. Only to have particularised the offence would have increased her dignity, and that she could not do.

"The whole thing is so monstrous," she said at last, shaking with suppressed anger.

"Not so monstrous, Maria, as if Linnet

had been compelled into marrying a man she does not love."

"Linnet would have been exceedingly comfortable with Mr. Burstborough, Owen. It is only your ridiculous way of exaggerating things."

"Be content, Maria. The thing that is done is done, and with my consent it will never be undone."

And so saying, Mr. Aubury went out of the room, leaving his wife undecided whether to wonder most at his folly, his audacity, or his determination.

CHAPTER XII.

HALF an hour afterwards, he returned for a moment to say that he was going across to see Miss Alvisa.

Mrs. Aubury felt that the game was more in her hands now, and she sent a message upstairs to Linnet, who had not yet made her appearance, saying that she should like to speak with her in the dining-room.

Linnet came, looking very pale and worn, but with quite a new calmness about her. Indeed, the Linnet of to-day was as different from the Linnet of the last few weeks as that Linnet had been

from the bright, innocent, unconscious girl who had given the new mistress of Florey Castle such a pleasant welcome only three months ago. Mrs. Aubury could not help being struck by it. As she said, a day or two afterwards, to Mrs. Polemont, when that little woman, hearing vague rumours as to what had happened, came to call, "if you had wrapped a black mantle round her and put a hood over her head, you might have thought she had spent her life in a nunnery. So ridiculous of girls to take such fancies about things."

Mrs. Aubury thought it would be as well to open the proceedings quietly.

"Linnet, my dear, I am very sorry to hear that you have behaved so strangely to Mr. Burstborough."

Linnet said nothing. Perhaps a look in her eyes intimated that there was other behaviour, equally strange, to be sorry for.

“It is, of course, only a passing quarrel, Linnet. You would not, you could not be so mad as to fling away from you the love of an honest and sincere man in this heartless way.”

“It would be more heartless to keep it, Maria.”

“Not at all, Linnet. You are young and inexperienced, and you are not competent to form an opinion for yourself so suddenly on a subject of such great importance. You would have found, Linnet, that, after your marriage with Mr. Burstborough, a deep and quiet attachment would have sprung up for him, even if you are not conscious of it at present. Though certainly your behaviour to him at first did quite give me the impression that you had a favourable feeling towards him.”

Linnet made no reply again. She had but too lately come up out of that horrible slough of despond—despond and evil doing both; and she felt the mire of it still

clinging to her soul. But to go into it again—never.

“I am quite sure, Linnet,” continued Mrs. Aubury, “that you are acting now under a mistaken idea of duty. You have worn yourself out by constant excitement and gaiety, and you are unable to see things clearly. After a few days of quiet, an entirely fresh light will arise upon your duty. You will then find that your present feelings towards Mr. Burstborough have entirely passed away. You will give him renewed affection and confidence. He has done nothing to forfeit either.”

“I shall never be able to give him anything, Maria, that he will care to receive. And, feeling in that way, it is unworthy of me to accept any love from him.”

“Then may I ask why you did accept it?”

Mrs. Aubury said that with an air of quiet triumph, considering that she had Mr. Burstborough's betrothed fast now in

the net of her own logic. But she had better not have asked the question. For reply, Linnet only looked her full in the face, a long, calm, searching look, which seemed to ask questions more difficult to answer. Why had *she* kept back Keith Moriston's letter, so leading the girl he loved, and who loved him, to believe that he cared nothing for her?

And Linnet's look said even more than that to Mrs. Aubury's unquiet mind. It seemed to imply that the young girl knew something about her own past, that she was reproaching her with having concealed it so carefully, that she was even now conscious of a certain power to humiliate her by revealing the whole truth about it.

She need not have been afraid. Linnet knew nothing at all. But Mrs. Aubury was beginning to hate her as much as if she had really known. It was the inevitable repulsion between falsehood and sincerity. However, the time was not yet

come for Mrs. Aubury to acknowledge anything. And, whatever happened, she was the mistress of Florey Castle. She had done nothing to forfeit that dignity. And she could afford to be gracious a little longer.

“Linnet,” she said, partly appropriating the accusation implied in the girl’s steadfast look, “it is quite impossible for you to judge of other people’s conduct in this matter. What you have to do, is to allow the judgment of those who have more experience than yourself. Whatever you may think now, the time will surely come when you will be deeply grateful to the friends who have stood between you and such a grievous mistake as that which it is not yet too late to rectify. I have told your brother that I shall write to Mr. Burstborough and apologise for you. And, if he does not feel himself too deeply injured, all may still be well between you.”

"All *is* well between us now," said Linnet, quietly.

Mrs. Aubury's face relaxed.

"You have written to him then, and begged his forgiveness?"

"No; but I shall do it to-night."

"That is right, Linnet. I knew you would act like a sensible girl. I told your brother I was sure you would not be so mad as to drive such a man permanently away from you. You may now, if you behave carefully, be more happy with him than before. You will never meet with a man who will make you a more unexceptionable husband."

The old expression again. But how far off now seemed the loathing and weariness with which she used to hear it once!

"It is not that, Maria. I shall ask him to forgive me for having ever made the mistake of thinking that I could marry him."

Mrs. Aubury shrugged her shoulders.

What an unaccountably foolish family she had married into !

“And then, Linnet. What then?”

“I have not thought of anything else. I shall have done what is right, and I must leave it.”

With exceeding leisureliness and dignity Mrs. Aubury laid aside her work, took off her thimble, knotted up a skein of silk, folded her hands, and looked across to the girl, who, with neither hope, nor fear, nor suspense, nor anxiety of any kind telling its story upon her face now, sat there opposite to her, minded only to do the right at last, whatever it might cost.

“Linnet, you are very young, and very inexperienced, and very headstrong. You have a girlish weakness for a man who is as foolish and forward as yourself, and who thinks that a passing fancy for you justifies him in asking you to share a life of poverty and privation.”

“Mr. Moriston has asked me to do nothing at all.”

“Linnet, I beg that you will not mention that man’s name in my presence. No words can express the contempt I feel for him. But I suppose you expect, when he hears of your exceedingly honourable conduct to Mr. Burstborough, that he will come forward and make his proposals. Which probably you will accept, until another passing fancy leaves him where Mr. Burstborough is now.”

An ominous light began to flash in Linnet’s eyes, but she took no notice of the taunt.

“I expect nothing at all. I only know this, that, until Mr. Burstborough has forgotten me sufficiently to marry some one else, I will never marry at all. That is the least restitution I can make to him.”

Mrs. Aubury had never thought of any restitution at all, except the one which

would have been the most acceptable to herself—namely, the renewal of the engagement. That Linnet should propose punishing herself by remaining unmarried, for the sake of sparing the feelings of a man for whom she did not care, was simply too ridiculous. Though really anything might be expected now, after the foolish things which had already been said and done.

“Then, Linnet, do I understand that you absolutely refuse to reconsider your conduct? You have decided not to apologise to Mr. Burstborough, and ask him to return to his former relations?”

“Yes. I shall ask him to forgive me, and that is all. I have done him a great wrong, and it is no use making it greater by going on with it.”

“Then, Linnet, I do not think we shall be able to live comfortably together any longer.”

“That is as my brother Owen decides,” said Linnet. “I am quite ready to do anything that he wishes.”

“It is not entirely as your brother Owen decides, Linnet. I happen to have a little authority in the decision. And I say this, that, under the circumstances, your presence here as my guest—which is really the position you have occupied since my marriage with Mr. Aubury—is no longer required.”

“Very well. Will you say when you wish me to go? I am ready at any time. I think Miss Alvisa will receive me for awhile.”

“Linnet, you will *not* go to Miss Alvisa at all.”

“If I am only here as a guest, have you any right to tell me where I shall go? Of course you can tell me *when*, and that is what I want know.”

“Linnet, will you kindly retire to your own room?”

Linnet did so, having had decidedly the best of the battle so far, and Mrs. Aubury resumed her work with considerable irritation of spirit.

CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER that followed dreary days for Linnet, and a cold loneliness, which no sense of right done could brighten. She had struggled out of her prison, but it was still a wilderness into which that struggle freed her ; and whether any land of promise lay beyond it, save that which the quiet doing of duty brings, she knew not.

A heavy cloud settled over the house. Mrs. Aubury, finding herself utterly unable to move either her husband or her young sister, maintained a rigid silence, together with the demeanour of a woman

who has been deeply insulted. It was Mr. Aubury's will that Linnet should not leave the house, except to go to Miss Alvisa; and to Miss Alvisa Mrs. Aubury was determined she should not go, and so far she had her own way.

But that was not a state of things that she intended to allow for very long. Perhaps, on the whole, it was better for Linnet to remain where she was for the present. To send her away to a distance would only provoke fresh gossip, and of that there was already enough. By-and-by, when the first excitement of the thing had blown over, and the nine-days' wonder of Mr. Burstborough's postponed wedding was not so much talked about, she would arrange for the girl to go away for an indefinite period. It could be managed very well, under pretext of a change being necessary for her health; and, once away, her return could be indefinitely put off, until people had ceased to ask about it.

Mrs. Aubury had her rights in that house, she said to herself, and to dispose of an inmate who had only the feeblest link of relationship as an excuse for remaining there, was certainly one of them.

So Linnet stayed, under a sort of tacit interdict as to all which could make her staying very pleasant. Mrs. Aubury had an unmistakable way of giving people to understand when they were in disgrace, and, as that way was signally manifested both to her husband and Linnet, the social atmosphere of Florey Castle was not of the most bracing sort. Still it was such as could be lived in without consequences serious enough to be taken much note of by outsiders. The master always was a quiet man, and he was no more than quiet now. Mrs. Aubury had never been other than courteous and ladylike to her guests. She was courteous and ladylike now. If Linnet's manner were a little altered, why, there was reason enough for that. Either

she had jilted Mr. Burstborough, and deserved to be made to suffer for it, or Mr. Burstborough had jilted her, and, in that case, her dulness was not to be wondered at, poor thing!

For of course people outside *had* their own opinions. A wedding that was within three weeks of its actual consummation, so near, indeed, that the dresses had all been bought, and the bridesmaids—Mrs. Flowerdale's nieces, two of them—chosen, and the decorations designed, and the banns all but proclaimed, could not be set aside without considerable comment. At first it was said to be only postponed, because, as Mrs. Aubury knew, when that idea had once been quietly inserted into people's minds, it was comparatively easy to follow it up, without too violent an explosion of surprise and curiosity, by the news of an actual breaking off. Then rumours were allowed to steal out relative to money difficulties, and then Linnet's

health, which had suddenly broken down, was assigned as a reason. And, finally, the public mind of Abbot's Florey having thus been judiciously prepared, Mrs. Aubury quietly announced to her more intimate friends, giving them leave to state it as a fact from her lips, that any idea of the marriage was now entirely given up, both parties having found reason to change their minds.

Perhaps no one but warm-hearted little Mrs. Polemont, amongst all the people who gossiped over the affair, guessed that Linnet cared enough for a poor man to break her faith with a rich one for his sake. She thought she knew how it had come about, though she stood in too much awe of Mrs. Aubury's severity to mention the matter to her again, since that afternoon when her remarks had received such a decided check. For, as she said to her husband, Maria was a person who could turn upon you so very sharply, if you did

say anything that she thought savoured of curiosity, either with respect to her own affairs or Linnet's. And somehow she had been much more authoritative in her manner since she married Mr. Aubury. It was not nearly so easy to say anything to her. You never knew how it might be taken, even though you meant it as kindly as possible. Still she was quite sure, and Maria might contradict it as much as she liked, there *had* been something between Linnet Aubury and young Moriston, and she believed that was why the marriage with Mr. Burstborough had come to nothing.

Mrs. Flowerdale thought so, too; though how any girl could be so foolish as to throw away a good settlement, as Linnet had done, she really could not understand. For her part—and she said so to the Miss Lauderdaleilles, and the Sturts, and the curate's wife, and indeed to everyone except the castle people themselves—she believed the health

and the money difficulties were nothing but a blind. Miss Aubury had jilted Mr. Burstborough. That was the plain truth, though of course her friends did not like to put it in that way.

And, if he had been jilted, he was just the sort of man to rush into another engagement immediately. And, in that case, she should keep Georgiana with her a few weeks longer, for there was no telling what might come of it. Mr. Burstborough seemed to enjoy driving over to the vicarage of an evening now, and he had not the air of a man who was inconsolable; neither did he show that bitterness and cynicism, that snappish way of speaking of women in general, which was a sure sign that the wound had gone deeply in. Of course he did feel it very much, just at first; no one could help seeing that, and being dreadfully sorry for him, but, if she was a good judge of character—and she had always considered herself as such—he would be

able to console himself, and that very shortly.

Or, if he had done it himself—and the Miss Laudervilles held to it very firmly that he had—the case was still the same, so far as keeping Georgiana a little longer. And really, from Linnet's downcast appearance, there might be something to be said on that side of the question. Everyone knew how very tossy and independent she had been, far too much so for a girl who had no fortune to bring to her husband; and perhaps she had carried it a little too far, and this was the end of it. One must not be too hard upon a man, if he tired of that sort of thing. Mr. Burstborough was not one to be played fast and loose with, like a portionless young student. He had that to give which might make any sensible girl look upon him with favour, and certainly that which should make him independent of the whims and caprices to which Miss Linnet had by all

accounts treated him. But it would be a lesson to her next time, if ever a next time came.

And so Georgiana stayed on for a few weeks longer with her aunt at the vicarage.

CHAPTER XIV.

THAT was the state of things on the 16th of December, the day which was to have been Linnet Aubury's wedding-day.

In the evening of that day the doctor came home unusually early to the cheery fire which his wife always had ready for him in the drawing-room. That was the pleasantest part of the day to them both ; for the doctor felt that his work was done, and now in the winter time, in the hour and a half of twilight before dinner, there was time for a cosy chat, and that chat somehow always made him feel thankful

that Jem had not spoken first, three years ago.

Isabel, looking charming in a new little lace cap which she had just finished, was perched upon his knee, her favourite place when about to hold an important domestic consultation.

"George."

"Well, Mrs. Flippety?"

"I have a favour to ask of you."

"No, Flippety, it is no use. You had a new bonnet at the beginning of the winter, with three feathers in it, so I am sure it must keep you warm enough. And then, on the strength of the wedding at the castle, you got ten guineas out of me for a new silk dress, and there has been no wedding, and I don't know what else you can want in that line. Don't try to bamboozle me, for I shall not allow it."

"I do not want to bamboozle you, old fellow. It is not a bonnet that I mean to get out of you this time, nor a dress either.

I am not even going to remind you of that set of Honiton lace which you promised me two years ago, though, at the same time, you know, if you *should* happen to remember it next time you go to Broadminster——”

“Which I will be sure not to do. Nothing suits you, Flippety, so well as a plain linen collar and cuffs.. You are perfectly charming then—at least, in your husband’s eyes. But, if it is neither bonnets nor dresses nor lace, what is it?”

“Well, I want you to go and call upon Mr. Aubury, just as a friend, you know, and tell him that you think Linnet wants a change of air.”

“But suppose I don’t think so?”

“That doesn’t make a bit of difference.”

“Yes, it makes just the difference that I shall not tell him Linnet wants anything of the sort.”

“Oh! George, you old *stupid*! As if I couldn’t see a great deal farther into it

than you can, though you are a doctor, and think so much of yourself! Linnet does want change, and, if you say so to Mr. Aubury, she will get it."

"And if I don't say so?"

"If you don't say so, you will have done a very mean thing. Mr. Aubury is rich enough, and I am sure he would not mind the expense, and he ought to take her to the north of Italy for a couple of months."

"Oh, come, Flippety! To the north of Italy!—that is rather a serious matter. I thought, at the most, it would not be more than Torquay, or something of that sort. Are you sure Torquay would not do?"

"Quite sure, George. Indeed, you may as well say nothing as say Torquay. Though, for that matter, you may as well say nothing as say anywhere but the north of Italy. That is where she must go, if the change is to do her any good. And she must go this winter."

"You are a very despotic physician,

Flippety. And are you sure that Miss Linnet deserves so much pity as to be sent to the north of Italy, after all the mischief she has been getting into?"

"She deserves all that ever you can give her. Now do be sensible, George."

"Yes. And to be sensible you must look on both sides of a question. And Linnet certainly has behaved very badly to poor Mr. Burstborough. Poor fellow! I think it is he who ought to be sent somewhere to get back his health and spirits, not the young lady who threw him overboard so coolly."

"Poor Mr. Burstborough indeed!" And Isabel gave herself an impatient shake. "He has found a better place than the north of Italy for getting up his health and spirits in. What would you say, George, if I told you that last Thursday, only the day before yesterday, he proposed to Georgiana Leverton? Yes, and was accepted."

"I should say it shows that he is a very sensible person."

"George!"

"Yes. Mr. Burstborough is one of those happy men for whom one young lady will do just as well as another, so long as she has a good face and a stylish figure, and knows how to dress herself nicely. There are more of them in the world than you imagine. Flippety, do you think, if you had said no to me, I should not have found a Mrs. Polemont somewhere else?"

"I never troubled myself to think about it at all," said the little wife, saucily. "All I know is, that, if I had not been Mrs. Polemont, I should have been Mrs. Somebody else."

"Ah! well, Flippety, you see I did not give you the chance of being Mrs. Anybody else, and a happy thing it has been for us both, has it not, little woman? But is Burstborough really engaged again?"

“Really and truly. Mrs. Flowerdale told me so herself only yesterday, so there is no mistake about it. They are to be married soon after the new year, and Mrs. Flowerdale says she and Mr. Burstborough do not at all wish it to be kept a secret.”

“And so she has told you about it. A very good way indeed to keep it from being anything of the sort. Yesterday; and how many people have you told already?”

“Only Maria herself, and the Miss Laudervilles. I should have told you last night, only you shut me up so by saying you must finish that paper to send to the *Lancet*. I am going to tell ever so many more people, though, this afternoon. Not that I couldn't keep from doing it if I liked, but I consider it a duty, after what Mrs. Flowerdale said about not wanting to make a secret of it.”

“Exactly. And a very pleasant duty,

too, so far as you are concerned. And so Burstborough is engaged again?"

"Yes. You keep going back to it as if it were not such a very common thing, after all. I believe poor Linnet suffered a great deal more about him than she did about herself, but I told her she need not trouble, for I was sure he was just the man to go and pick up somebody else almost directly. Not that I expected him to do it quite so soon, though, because he really did seem very much cut up for a day or two."

"All right. Then as Miss Linnet will not have to suffer any more about it, now that he has comforted himself, why is there any necessity for her to go to the north of Italy?"

"Why, for one thing, George, it would be no end of a nuisance to them all to be here when the wedding takes place. They are almost bound to go away somewhere, for appearance sake."

"Very well. And for another thing?"

"I am not going to tell you any other things. George, you might be reasonable, and take my word for it that nothing would be half so good for her as what I have said."

"Why shouldn't they go to Rome when they are about it?"

"Oh! by all means let them go to Rome, if they like. I have not the least objection. Only say that they ought to try the north of Italy first, because—because——"

"Come, Flippety, out with it."

"Well, because it is not quite so far, to begin with, and because it is not quite such a sudden change of climate. And because——"

"And because," put in the doctor, giving his little wife a kiss—"because you have just been to the old vicarage to see Miss Alvisa."

Mrs. Polemont coloured all over, but stood it out bravely a little longer.

“Well, George, I must go to see Miss Alvisa, because she cannot come to see me.”

“No, not just yet; but take my word for it she will be coming, some of these days, though I don't suppose she will ever be quite so strong on her pins as you are, little woman. I'll give her a twelvemonth, and then we shall see what we shall see. But confess, now, why you want Linnet to go to the north of Italy.”

“I won't.”

“It is because you have been to see Miss Alvisa, and Miss Alvisa has told you that Moriston is at Milan now, with the Stormonts. That is all about it, isn't it, Flippety?”

“Well, yes, that is very nearly all about it. And, oh! George, whatever else you do, don't tell Maria that he is there, or

everything will come to nothing. She hates him like poison. I'm sure I don't know why, unless it is that he has kept Linnet from marrying Mr. Burstborough. You *will* say they ought to go, will you not?"

"All right, little woman."

And Dr. Polemont, who knew a great deal more than his wife thought he did about some things, set out the very next morning with the intention of calling at the castle. But on his way he met Mr. Aubury, and, thinking that he might as well save time, told him, as they chatted for a few minutes by the wayside, that, unless he wished that young sister of his to slip away altogether, he had better take her off to some pleasant, cheerful place, where she could have amusement and change as well as the benefit of a warmer climate. For his own part, as it was not a question of expense, he should recommend the north of Italy, and then, if they

chose to go quietly on to Rome, it might be interesting for them all. But they ought not to come home under two or three months at the very least, as Linnet was in a condition now which would require time to bring her round again.

And Mr. Aubury promised to talk to his wife about it.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. AUBURY objected. She was sure Linnet's health did not require such extreme measures. It was a great mistake to let girls get the idea they were delicate, and then make such a fuss over them. It was enough to produce disease where none actually existed. And as for going anywhere to be out of the way of the wedding, there was not the slightest necessity for anything of the sort. It was not as if Mr. Burstborough himself had broken it off. Then it might perhaps have been a little awkward for him to have married some one else out of the

village so soon. But Linnet had seemed to recover both health and spirits as soon as ever she heard of his engagement to Mrs. Flowerdale's niece, and she quite believed that, when the wedding was over, she would be almost herself again.

"No, my dear Mr. Aubury,"—she generally called her husband Mr. Aubury now, since that little domestic dissension about Mr. Burstborough,—“no, my dear Mr. Aubury, you may tell Dr. Polemont that I do not see the slightest necessity for anything of the kind. It would involve shutting up the house and placing the servants on board wages, and the expense would be enormous. I cannot think whatever put it into his head to suggest such a thing.”

“Linnet's health, Maria, as I told you.”

Mrs. Aubury looked at her husband fixedly.

“Mr. Aubury, if Linnet is to be placed before me always in this manner, and her convenience consulted rather than my own,

I think it is time that I ceased to trouble you with my presence in the house at all. If you wish me to be only an underling, say so, and I shall know my position."

"I wish you to be exactly what you have been from the day I made you my wife, Maria, the lady of the house, and the first to be considered in all matters. But it does not follow that, because you are the first, you are the only one. I have duties towards Linnet, too."

"Very well, Mr. Aubury, look out for some quiet place on the south coast. There are plenty of ladies with small incomes who would be glad enough to increase them by taking charge of a girl for board and lodging, and she would have a comfortable home and be well looked after. But to the north of Italy she certainly shall not go, if it involves what I know it will involve, the breaking up of the house, and all the other trouble to which I shall be subjected on her

account. Linnet's health does not need it, Mr. Aubury. If it did, I should be willing to make some sacrifice, though not to the extent of going to Italy."

"Then what is to be said to Dr. Polemont?"

"Nothing at all. You have never asked his opinion, and there is no necessity for him to give it. Tell him, next time you see him, that I cannot consent to such an upheaval of all our plans."

Which Mr. Aubury did, and then, rather regretfully, gave up the idea of the Italian trip, which he would gladly have taken, both on Linnet's account and his own, if his wife would have looked more favourably upon it.

"I told you so, Flippety," said the doctor, coming in, the evening after their previous conversation. "I met Aubury this afternoon, as I was crossing the moor from old Mrs. Brocklebank's, and he says Mrs. Aubury will not hear of it. You

know, it *is* rather a break up, and especially as she must have had a good deal of worry lately with this engagement affair. It is almost too much to expect her to do it, except in a matter of life and death, and it is not that with Linnet by a long way."

"You don't know what it is with Linnet, George, and so there is no necessity for you to give your opinion. I stick to what I said at first, that nothing will do her half so much good as going to north Italy, and to north Italy she shall go, spite of all the Mrs. Auburys in the world."

"That is easier said than done, little woman."

"George," and Mrs. Polemont turned and looked half saucily, half defiantly at her clever old husband, who, with all his knowledge of bones, and muscles, and nerves, and the rest of the belongings of the physical anatomy, was not quite so sharp as herself sometimes in finding out

peculiarities connected with the spiritual constitution of that wonderful creature, woman. "George, you and Mr. Aubury have both been rather clumsy in this affair, and so have I. But I know where I have gone wrong, do you know where you have?"

"Not a bit of it, Flippety. I am sure I did the best I could. And Aubury said the same."

"Well, George, you go to the castle again."

"I haven't been at all yet. I happened upon Aubury the day before yesterday, and I thought it would save me the trouble of a call if I told him about it then."

"All right. That is so much the better, because you will not seem to be pressing it so much. Well, then, go and make a call upon Maria, and don't say a word about Linnet's health, nor even so much as ask how she is. And Maria will be sure to say something to you about her neuralgia,

and you must tell her that nothing will do her good but change of climate. And you may take my word for it, George, that if you make Maria the invalid, and break up the establishment on her account, you will find it won't take half so much breaking. There then."

"Flippety! And you Mrs. Aubury's most intimate friend in Abbot's Florey."

"Yes, that is why I know so much about her. You have often told me that we must take people as we find them and make the best of them; and that is what I am doing about Maria. And I have heard you say, too, that we must make the best use of their infirmities."

"Which you are also doing. I didn't give you credit for so much penetration, Flip."

"I know you didn't. Very well, then, follow the advice you have given me. And if you tell me, after you have seen Mrs. Aubury, that the establishment refuses

to be broken up, then I will take Linnet to Italy myself. See if I don't, George. So now you know what you have to expect."

Dr. Polemont called the very next afternoon, and found his wife a true prophet. Mrs. Aubury did mention her neuralgia. It was positively wearing her out, she said. She could scarcely stir into the open air without such acute pain; and as for a strong wind, why, the very thought of it was enough to bring on an attack. She was very much afraid the climate of Abbot's Florey was not going to agree with her in the winter time.

The doctor looked at her with a grave, professional air, and asked her if she was very susceptible to atmospheric influences.

"Oh! Dr. Polemont, I am ridiculously sensitive to anything of that sort. Why, in Broadminster, after I once got that frightful neuralgia into my system, in consequence of nursing poor Mr. Fledborough

through his rheumatic fever, you know, I was as dependent upon the way the wind blew as a ship that has lost its screw. And if it happened to be in the east, or if there was the slightest damp in it, I was simply good for nothing. I was considerably better, as you remember, when first I came here, but I think the place is gradually losing its good effect."

The doctor looked serious, and said that he did not think a weakness of that kind would be completely rooted out by anything but change of climate. He had great faith in change of climate himself, he said. It did much more than medicine in some cases. And, if he were asked to give his opinion, he should say the south of France. Or, better still, if Mr. Aubury did not mind the distance and the expense—and the doctor said he was quite sure, for his wife's health, he would not—North Italy, where a tour might be made so much more interesting. The south of France

would very probably do all that was necessary, but Italy would do it more effectually.

“You see,” he said, “a great deal depends upon the sort of climate to which you have been accustomed.”

“Yes, doctor,” said the unconscious Mrs. Aubury, taking the bait with the greatest facility. “Broadminster is a very relaxing place, and I have no doubt, as you say, that a complete change would be just the thing for me.”

“It is not so much the climate of later years which affects the question, as that to which you were accustomed in your childhood. Now, if you had a bracing air then——”

And the doctor looked inquiringly.

Mrs. Aubury, in a general way, turned aside any questions which bore upon the conditions of her early life. She preferred to be known as an orchid, which has no roots out of sight. Still, as the doctor's

interest was entirely professional, there was no harm in telling him what he probably knew already from Isabel, that she *had* been accustomed in her youth to a more bracing climate.

“Ah! then you will feel this; and you ought to have a complete change. I should really say North Italy. Florence now would just suit you, only stay long enough, wherever you go.”

“Oh! yes, certainly. It is no use doing things by halves. Only it will involve a great deal of trouble, and I do so dislike appearing to make myself of so much importance.”

“Never mind that, my dear lady,” said Dr. Polemont, re-assuringly. “The first trouble is the least. And, as for importance, who should be important, if the lady of the house is not?”

Mrs. Aubury was quite able to see it in that light. Still one needed to hold out a little.

"I shall really feel almost ashamed to ask my husband to do so much for me. He was telling me only yesterday that you had suggested something of the kind for Linnet, and I really quite shrank from the prospect."

"Oh ! yes," said the doctor, carelessly playing with the seals on his watch-chain, "Linnet would be none the worse of a little turn out. We can all of us do with it, once in a while. But for *you* I should decidedly recommend it. Decidedly. In fact, you ought all of you to go. But, my dear madam, make yourself the first consideration."

"Oh ! Dr. Polemont. As if I could do such a thing. But I will think about it. I will really promise you to do that. I feel it is my duty, both to myself and my husband, to try to get into a better state of health."

"And, if it necessitates the breaking up of the establishment for a time, do not

hesitate, Mrs. Aubury. Remember that you really *do* require it."

"Oh! we could break up the establishment, if that is all. And then, you know, doctor, I have been so worried lately. This wretched affair of Linnet's——"

"Yes, yes; but do not let it prey upon your mind. And a trying time of the year coming on. You have no idea how the wind blows across that moor in January. You must be off as soon as you can. And, whatever else you do, do not return until you have consulted me about it."

Which Mrs. Aubury promised to do, and Dr. Polemont took his leave, chuckling over the story which he should have to tell his wife when he got home. And Mrs. Aubury was delighted to think that there was one sensible man in the village, at any rate, who did not think Linnet the only person in the world.

CHAPTER XVI.

AND so it came to pass that, the week before Christmas—and Mr. Burstborough's wedding was to take place the week after—the castle was shut up, and Mr. and Mrs. Aubury and Linnet set out for a three months' residence abroad.

On account of Mrs. Aubury's health, as that lady explained to her friends, some reason being, of course, required for such a sudden move. The doctor had ordered her away at once, because she must not think of such a thing as remaining at the castle during the winter in her present delicate condition. So the plate was sent

away to the bank at Broadminster, and the servants were put on board wages, and the only sign of life to be seen anywhere about the place was at the old keep, where Martlet and his wife were left in general charge until the family returned.

Mrs. Aubury would much have preferred leaving Linnet behind, but she had not been able to arrange it. Mr. Aubury, yielding as water in most things, was firm as a rock in that. Now that she had heard from the Flowerdales that young Moriston was settled at Heidelberg, there would not have been so much danger in sending her over to Miss Alvisa ; or, better still, in contriving for her to spend a couple of months or so with Mrs. Polemont, just the very companion for anyone who had been a little out of spirits, for she was always so full of life and fun and brightness. And she had sounded Mrs. Polemont on the subject, and, when the doctor's wife had not quite seemed to un-

derstand, she had mentioned it plainly, and asked whether she could receive Linnet for a month or two, whilst the castle was obliged to be shut up on account of her own health requiring a change. But, to her surprise, Mrs. Polemont had decidedly negatived the proposal, saying that the present arrangements of the house would not admit of a comfortable home being made for her there for so long a visit. Though really how Isabel could have managed with herself for an indefinite time during the previous summer, and now could not put up a young girl conveniently for a couple of months, was rather strange. And not at all like Isabel, who was generally delighted to have anybody in the house, especially young people. However, a matter of that kind could not be pressed, and so Linnet went with them, though Mrs. Aubury made up her mind that Isabel should feel it some of these days.

“I wish ’em all safe back, that’s what I do,” said Martlet, on Christmas Eve, as he and his wife ate their frumenty by the fire in the keep-room. “But there’s never no telling when once people gets set off to them furrin parts. I say as long as they’re in your own country you know what’s going to happen; but, when they get among them papish folk, you can’t say where they are. I’d rather they’d stopped at home by the stuff, that’s what I’d rather.”

“And let Miss Linnet see the wedding go by, Martlet? Nay, never. I’d liever a deal have the place shut up than that.”

“It isn’t seeing the wedding go by as would give Miss Linnet trouble, Betsey. I’ve eyes to see further than that. And it isn’t to cheer *her* up that they’ve gone, whatever else they’ve gone for. I telled you from the very first she wasn’t set to be content with him. There was that

night when they first comed home together from the picnic."

"Yes, you did," said Betsey, rather hurriedly, seeing that her husband was minded to go through the whole story again, as a proof of his own far-sightedness. "And I never said you nay over it, so there's an end. But I wouldn't care what they'd gone for, Martlet, only they was safe back again. I'd rather it had been Mr. Burstborough than never a young man at all, as it seems likely enough to be now, and poor Miss Linnet keeping herself to herself the way she does. Madam don't seem to encourage nobody to come about the place now, same as she'd used to do; but if it was as full of company as an egg's full of meat, I don't believe Miss Linnet would look at one of them."

"Nor me neither, Betsey. Unless Mr. Moriston was that one, which he won't be while madam is the missis. I don't

often say a thing that I can't back up with sensibleness, and I say this, that, if our young lady don't wed Mr. Moriston, it's unwed she'll be all her days, and contenteder, too, than if she'd took up with anybody else. She'd a battle she had, to get herself shook clear of Mr. Burstborough, but ever since she done it she hasn't been like the same. And, Betsey, if you can go contrary to my words, do. I'm agreeable. All the same I'd a deal rather they'd stopped at the place, to keep things comfortable like."

And Martlet, setting down his bowl of frumenty, looked rather disconsolately at the massive stone walls and beamed roof of the keep kitchen, guiltless now, though it was Christmas Eve, of other decoration than Betsey's brightly-scoured tins and brasses. For the good woman had stoutly refused to put so much as a sprig of holly in the delf case, or to hang a bit of mistletoe from one of the bacon-hooks

in the rafters, for any of the out-door men to kiss Tidy under, if they happened to meet conveniently. Or even for Martlet himself to do it, and no offence either, so long as she was there to see it with her own eyes. For nobody could say that she was a mean woman, nor a suspicious, about a little bit of fun at Christmas time, when it was open and above board. But now circumstances altered cases.

“No, Martlet, none of your gallivanting this year, and the family gone away looking as dull as they did. I should feel as if I wasn't doing my duty to them to encourage anything of the sort, and me belonging to the place for the years I have; though in a general way you've never found me the one to object to anything that was reasonable, let it be under the mistletoe, or let it be anywhere else. For, if I put a sprig or a berry in the window this year, I don't doubt but there's them in the village would be ready to say

I'd done it out of respect to Mr. Burstborough's wedding coming past this way. And that's what I wouldn't have them say, Martlet, no, not if you was to hire me to it."

"I believe you, Betsey. You're not the woman. All the same, though, and with no offence meant, it's a poor thing is Christmas, when you haven't something comfortable and viewable along with it. It's like going to church, and never the parson in the pulpit."

"Well, and if he wasn't there, you could say your prayers all the same, couldn't you?" replied Betsey, who had a certain fine liberalism in matters ecclesiastical. "It isn't the parson, nor the pulpit neither, as makes church, at least to my way of thinking. It wouldn't be a deal to me whether he was there or whether he wasn't, so long as I'd my place to sit in, and my prayer-book as Miss Goodenough give me when we was married, and a clean cap-

border inside my bonnet, and my things respectable, so as people might see I didn't belong to your nasty shiftless sort. It's *that* that I look to, Martlet, is my place and my book, and to have the parish see that I'm there, and to walk out after the master, as them has a right to do that's been in the family so many years. And if ever I do feel proud, Martlet, it's when I'm set there behind him, and you in your Sunday coat beside me, and Miss Good-enough's monument on the wall that I was a faithful servant to for as good as five and thirty year from first to last, with never a sixpence missed that I had the management of. That's what church is to me, Martlet, and always will be. And as for the vicar, I think you might have found something better to liken him to than a bit of holly, that you stick in your front window, and then side out when the time's past."

"I ask his pardon, Betsey. It wasn't

said with any offence, me not being of such a spirit, for there isn't a man I respect more, let alone the master hisself. But if you don't have the holly, Betsey, you'll have a little something out of the common for dinner, won't you? I don't see as that would be favouring Mr. Burstborough over-much."

"No, Martlet; there won't be anything of my making. You're going to get church, and parson, and pulpit, all three, at the duke's lodge to-morrow. Mrs. Barkley asked me yesterday, as soon as she knew for certain the family was to be away. She says to me, 'Mrs. Martlet,' she says, 'you'll be kind of lost without them, and me and my husband has plenty for four, with the duke behaving as liberal as he always does at Christmas time; and it would be a deal of pleasure to us, if you would sit you down same as ourselves;' which I told her I hadn't the least objection to, Martlet, nor was sure you wouldn't

have neither, and much obliged to her. And I shall make it up to them both at Whissuntide, so as nobody can say we have gone to other folk's table to save our own, which is a thing I'd scorn to, Martlet, and you can bear me witness."

"Well, Betsey, as long as it's a comfortable dinner, I don't mind. It's the vittles, more than what you put in the window or what you don't, that makes a man like me enjoy his Christmas. Else I'd settled you'd have a bit of pork, same as usual, with apple sass and stuffings, and only ourselves to it. And then I could have set quiet afterwards with my pipe, as it's a thing, is a bit of pork at my time of life, that you need to sit quiet after, if you mean comfort, and particular where there's stuffings along with it. It adds a deal, does the stuffings, to a bit of pork, but it needs quietness after it, more than if it was roasted plain, at least, to my thinking."

And Mr. Martlet looked regretful. One

could be content upon occasion, nay, more than content, without either parson, or pulpit, or Christmas decoration, so long as one had the church itself in the shape of a savoury pork roast, especially with sauce and onions, and leisure to sit quiet after. But dining out brought an element of constraint into the situation. One might have more, but might not have it so comfortably. And Mr. Barkley was a man who had a good deal to say for himself, and liked you to say plenty too, which was not always convenient after one's Christmas dinner.

“ I'd rather have been to ourselves, Betsey, and the roast same as usual. But I don't doubt you've done it for the best.”

“ Yes, Martlet, and you'll do better than a pork roast at the duke's lodge, though it's a good thing in its way, and that rich that you need to rest yourself upon it, which is why I don't have it as a general thing, excepting Sundays, when I always

reckon to take my sleep, and leave the washing-up for Monday morning. It's going to be a goose, Martlet, that's what it's going to be, and one that's run in the stubble, too. And the pudding out of the duke's kitchen, as the cook always has orders to supply it at such times; and not at all inferior to the family neither."

"Then it'll take a deal of resting after, Betsey. That's why I always say, if it's going to be anything above the common, let us have it at home, and then you know where you are, and you can be as comfortable as you like. But maybe Mr. Barkley feels the same, when there's a heavy meal to be considered. Else in a general way he's as ready for his talking one time as another, which is what I'm not partial to."

"He'll do what's reasonable, Martlet, so don't you fear. And, if not, it is only for me to speak the word to Mrs. Barkley. She's a woman, like myself, that knows when a bit of sleep is necessary, and I

don't doubt but what she'll arrange conveniently for it."

"And then there's the sovereign the master left, Betsey," said Martlet, still dubious about that dining-out business. "It was for us to make ourselves comfortable with on Christmas Day."

"It's where it'll be took care of, Martlet, so don't you fear. If him and Miss Linnet had been here, I would have spent it with freedom and pleasure likewise, for them to see that we were showing a proper spirit of gratitude; but, them being where they are, the money's just as comfortable in my old stocking foot. I always misgive putting a sovereign down my throat when there's a better place to put it. And then, Martlet, when the warm weather gets agate, and we needn't look so hard at a couple of fat chickens afore killing them, we'll have Mrs. Barkley and Mr. over, and there shan't be anything kept back on my part to make them comfortable."

“ But there’s a deal may happen before Whissuntide, Martlet,” continued Betsey, with an air of solemnity, as she gathered up the empty bowls and prepared to wash them. “ Folks sets off, but when they’ll come safe back isn’t a thing you can tell so easy. When I shut to the gate after them three, Martlet, this very day is a week, and dropped them my curtsey, and wished a good journey and a quick return, it lay as strong on my mind as if I’d had it spoke to me in Bible words that there was something to come of it. I didn’t open out to you, Martlet, because I’m not a woman that talks—no, nor ever was—but I said to myself, as I come back in here and set myself down by the fire alone, you being out among the autumn-sown wheat, that, if I made my curtsey to the same three of ’em when it was opening the gate for their back return that was necessary, I would never believe my own feelings again.”

“Betsey, you don’t say it.”

“I do, Martlet, and mean it likewise. And the why and the wherefore I can’t tell you, no more than I can a deal of things; but there’s my words, and before Whissuntide I hope you mayn’t have need to remember them. There, then, I’ve done.”

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER a week spent in crossing the Continent leisurely, Mr. and Mrs. Aubury and Linnet found themselves in private rooms at Milan, Mrs. Aubury having decided upon the private rooms in preference to an hotel, where you were obliged to meet everybody, whoever they might be.

Of course, the home-life which had to be lived by the three of them in Signora Monti's apartments, overlooking the west front of the cathedral, was very much the same as that which had been lived just before in the old chapel-room of Florey Castle, overlooking the big black yew-tree

and the dingle path. No new element had been introduced into it. Wherever Mrs. Aubury went, she carried her own atmosphere with her, and expected other people to live and move and have their being in it. And as this residence abroad was, as she reminded them, entirely on her account, it was but natural that what she wished to see, and where she wished to go, should be the guiding motive of the party.

She soon found out that Milan is a place where private apartments are apt to become tedious, especially where all freedom of action or expression is carefully kept out of them. After having sauntered through the Brera once or twice, where she could not understand any of the pictures, and seen Leonardo's famous "Last Supper," and looked at his statue in the piazza, and admired the painted roof of the cathedral, under the impression that it was of carved stone, she began to com-

plain of weariness. Really, if that was all, they might as well have stayed at home.

Mr. Aubury suggested Florence, as being within a tolerably easy journey. He now scrupulously obeyed his wife's command never to mention the name of Keith Moriston in her presence, or he might perhaps have said that he had heard from Miss Alvisa of the possibility of the Stormonts and their tutor being there early in January. And Linnet knew nothing of it. Miss Alvisa wisely thought that whatever came to pass had better come in its own way, and she never, even in her letters to Keith, mentioned that the Auburys were coming to Italy at all.

So to Florence they went, this time to a quiet *pension* on the Lung' Arno, where, if Mrs. Aubury wanted society, she could have it in the drawing-room, or, if she wanted quiet, she could have that in her own apartment.

And, as she had heard that the Uffizi Palace was the proper thing to be done by anyone who wished to have a reputation for artistic taste, she went to the Uffizi accordingly most days, accompanied by her husband and Linnet, where, if she could not enjoy the pictures, she could at least enjoy criticising the people who looked at them.

And if Linnet or Mr. Aubury, who did not aspire to artistic taste, suggested changing the programme by a drive to San Miniato, or up the Fiesole hill, she would say, with dignity,

“I was under the impression that we came here entirely on account of my own health, and Dr. Polemont expressly ordered me not to expose myself to a cutting wind. But pray do not let me interfere with your arrangements, Linnet. If you prefer it, go with your brother. I can go to the Uffizi, and sit quietly there by myself. I daresay I shall be able to get

through the morning without any companionship."

So that of course it ended by their all going to the Uffizi. And that was where they went one Wednesday morning, when they had been in Florence about a week.

They were sitting in the Tribune, that being Mrs. Aubury's favourite resting-place, on account of the well-dressed people who were generally to be seen strolling about amongst the pictures. It did not happen to be a crowded day. Linnet had gone into the long gallery, where Giotto's and Cimabue's quaint old saints looked down, calm-eyed and meditative, upon the stream of modern European and American prosperity which eddied and fidgetted round them. Mr. Aubury remained in the Tribune with his wife, she not liking to be left by him in any public place, as it implied want of attention. He was watching the faces, she the dresses, of the people. They never spoke to each other, not happening

to have any thoughts in common just then ; but still Mrs. Aubury, having her husband in attendance, was satisfied.

A noble-looking woman, just past the prime of life, tall, graceful, with large, kindly blue eyes, passed them, and looked rather inquiringly at her. But Mrs. Aubury, busily engaged in observing the bonnet of a lady whom she had just heard addressed as "dear duchess," did not notice the look. The stranger passed on towards one of Raphael's Madonnas, and shortly afterwards returned, a gentleman with her now, and another lady. After a second inquiring look, she fell back a little from her companions, and said, in a quiet voice, scarcely loud enough to be overheard,

"Yes, it *is* Plummersleigh. I was sure I could not be mistaken. But I had no idea you were in service on the Continent now. I am glad to see you looking so well. Pray with whom are you living?"

Mrs. Aubury coloured, looked rapidly round to her husband, who, fortunately, was just at that moment attracted by a picture on the opposite side of the room, and then replied, in a very low voice,

“I am not in service now, my lady. Excuse me, I must look for a friend.”

“All right. Good morning. I am glad to see you are comfortable.”

And the lady passed on to her companions. Mrs. Aubury watched them out of the room. Then she turned to her husband.

“I think we will go somewhere else. I have seen enough of the pictures now. You and Linnet were saying something about a drive to San Miniato. I think I have no objection to it.”

“Just as you please, my dear Maria. I am quite ready to leave the pictures myself, if you are. Shall we cross to the Pitti, now we are here, or would you like to go out at once?”

“Oh! at once, or the beauty of the day will be over. Where is Linnet?”

“In the gallery. I will bring her to you.”

“No, thank you. I will go with you. I am quite tired of this room. The air is so stifling.”

And the lady with the large blue eyes had returned for a last look at the Fornarina.

So they found Linnet, and then returned, making for the Uffizi entrance. They mistook their way, and, as they were retracing it, they met the lady again, with her companions. She gave a sort of half kindly, half careless greeting to Mrs. Aubury, who returned it with not so much self-possession as was her wont. And then the lady looked somewhat curiously at Linnet and her brother.

“Who is that lady, Maria?” said Mr. Aubury. “I did not know we had any acquaintances here.”

"It must be somebody, my dear, who has mistaken me for another person. Such things often happen in places of resort like this."

"But I fancied I caught the name Plummersleigh as she passed us."

"Oh! dear, no," and Mrs. Aubury looked annoyed. "You must have misunderstood. She was probably speaking Italian to her friends."

"But she is not an Italian. I heard her speaking in the Tribune just now. And then you returned her greeting, did you not?"

"Of course. I was obliged to do that, Owen. It would have looked unladylike to have passed without a word!"

"Not at all, if you did not know her. And of course it is a mistake, because I heard her spoken to in the Tribune as Lady somebody. I did not catch the name."

"Well, it is of no consequence. I did no more than was necessary under the

circumstances. If we should happen to come across her again, I shall try to get out of the way. I do so dislike to be mistaken for anyone else. It makes one appear so common-place. But do let us go into the open air. This place is positively suffocating me. I cannot think why they do not ventilate these galleries better. And then, when you do get outside, of course you are half frozen. I feel my neuralgia coming on at the very thought of it."

"Don't you think we had better go on to the Pitti?" suggested her husband. "We shall be under cover all the way, and perhaps the place will be a little more comfortable. People generally do take the two galleries in succession."

Which was the very reason that Mrs. Aubury would not wish so to take them, and run the risk of meeting the blue-eyed stranger again.

"No. I prefer going outside. And, as

you were suggesting a drive to San Miniato before we came to the gallery at all, we will go there. Anything to be out of this stifling atmosphere."

So they came down into the square in front of the Palazzo Publico, and there they got into a carriage which took them up to the lovely winding slopes and olive gardens of San Miniato. And, fortunately for Mrs. Aubury, the wind was in the east, and, still more fortunately, the vetturino said it nearly always was so at that time of the year in Florence.

"Then how could you think of such a thing as bringing me here?" she said to her husband, as she leaned over to him to have her head enveloped in a large crimson shawl which he always carried about, in case it should be required for that purpose. "You know Dr. Polemont said I was on no account to expose myself to an east wind, as it was sure to bring on a severe attack of pain. It really seems as if you

had proposed it on purpose that I might be obliged to remain in the house. It was so very thoughtless of you. I must leave the place at once. I felt that it would never suit me as soon as I set foot in it. Only you seem to have the idea that I am always complaining."

"Not in the least, Maria. I shall be very glad to go anywhere else, if you think a change will suit you. Suppose we push on to Rome."

"Not yet. Dr. Polemont said, after I had got a little more accustomed to the climate of the country, I might try a few weeks in Rome, but I must on no account go too early, and we have not been a month away from home yet. I think he said something about Venice suiting me better. It was so foolish of me not to keep a list of the places he recommended, but I do so dislike appearing to make a fuss over myself. I don't suppose you remember any of them?"

“No, Maria. I was not in the room when Dr. Polemont was giving you his advice. But all places are alike to me. We will return to the *pension* at once, if you like, and pack up our things, and start to-morrow.”

“Thank you. And if Venice does not suit me any better than this wretched Florence has done, I shall ask you to take me back to Florey Castle, for I begin to think Dr. Polemont has made a decided mistake in ordering me abroad at all.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

SO to Venice they started, and started on the following day, too, Mrs. Aubury being minded to lose no more time than necessary in putting a good two hundred miles of railway journey between herself and the art galleries of fair Florence.

For the lady with the large blue eyes had not been at all mistaken when she gave that glance of kindly recognition to the mistress of Florey Castle. And she was naturally somewhat surprised to find the "Plummersleigh" of some ten years before, walking in apparently familiar intercourse with a lady and gentleman who

bore upon them the stamp of gentlefolk, neither Maria's beauty, nor her mind, nor her manners, though all good enough in their way, being of that striking superiority which would be likely to command a marriage so much above her original position.

They found their way to an hotel in Venice, overlooking the Piazza of St. Mark. Everything went on with tolerable quietness for about a week. If Mrs. Aubury was more silent than usual, and insisted less upon being the centre and fountain of authority, it was because her thoughts were engaged now upon how she should manage matters if anything more was said about that unlucky encounter in the Uffizi Palace. But her husband had apparently forgotten it. And as the days went on, and neither east wind nor neuralgia troubled her, and, whether she insisted or not, everything gave way to her own convenience, she began to think that

she should be able to spend the winter very comfortably abroad.

She was not, however, to be left in peace. One pleasant, sunny morning, warm even for Venice at that time of the year, they were going down the canal which leads past the *casa di Camillo*, when their gondola slightly grazed that in which a lady and gentleman, with two children, were sitting. Mrs. Aubury retreated as far as possible within the awning, and apparently had no attention for anything but the mouldering remains of dog-tooth and sculptured foliage on the old palace which they had just reached. But the blue-eyed stranger had seen her again, and again the smile of kindly condescension was waiting.

“Maria, that is the same lady we met in the Uffizi. She *must* know you. It cannot be a mistake again. And how strange that she should have followed us here !”

“Mr. Aubury, I cannot help it, if she

will persist in taking me for somebody else."

"Are you sure she is mistaking you, Maria? Have you no recollection of her? Perhaps it is some one you knew a long time ago. Some of your friends in Scotland perhaps."

Though Mr. Aubury distinctly remembered hearing the noble-looking stranger addressed as Lady somebody when they saw her before in the Tribune, and he was not aware that his wife had been intimate with any members of the aristocracy; though, when she did refer to her connections, it was with the manner of a person who has been dropped by them on account of her own descent in the social scale.

"My dear Mr. Aubury, I cannot go so far back. The lady, whoever she may be, must be short-sighted; and, in a place like this, one is so apt to think one may meet one's old friends. I have seen several

faces already that remind me very much of people I used to know long ago."

Which was indeed true, as regarded that one particular face, with the large blue eyes, which were only too familiar to her in the years of her earlier womanhood. And, as Mrs. Aubury parried her husband's innocent inquiries, a cold, creeping sickness of heart seemed to come over her. For the past, which she had wrapped up so carefully, not because she had done any evil in it, but because the knowledge of it would humiliate her in the eyes of her present friends, was beginning to struggle into sight. And if Mrs. Flowerdale got hold of it, and Mrs. Polemont, and all the other people at Abbot's Florey, how could she hold up her head amongst them any more?

And it would not do, either, to talk about leaving Venice at once. That would arouse her husband's questionings, or Linnet's, who would be sure to connect it with

the lady's re-appearance. The only thing she could do now would be to shut herself up in the hotel for a few days, which she could easily do, under the pretext of neuralgia; and then say that she should like to return to Florey Castle at once, the climate of Italy not agreeing with her.

And indeed next day she found that she had a better excuse than even neuralgia for declining to go out. She had the symptoms of a slight feverish attack, due partly to malaria from the canals, and partly to the nervous fear which had seized her, now that, even though she kept herself a prisoner, either her husband or Linnet might meet this lady, and be impelled by curiosity to speak to her, and learn all.

Yet she could not always keep them with her. For Mr. Aubury's thoughts did very often turn to the stranger, and his questions, though he had no intention of being troublesome in pressing them, were often

exceedingly difficult to put aside. So, of the two evils, it appeared the least to be left to herself, and trust to Providence for her husband and the blue-eyed stranger not to meet again.

“And as soon as I am in the least degree recovered, Owen, I should like to go home. I shall never forgive Dr. Polemont for having been so inconsiderate as to send me here, when he must have known the air would be so dangerous for me; and in these wretched hotels, too, where one can have none of the comforts of one's own fireside. But you must not stay in with me. There is really no necessity for it. I must learn to accustom myself to the want of society, as I am likely to be a prisoner so long as we remain here.”

“Would you prefer my taking Linnet out, Maria? I will willingly remain in the house with you, if you wish it.”

“Oh! dear, no. Do not remain in the

house with me on any account. I would much rather be alone."

So Mr. Aubury and Linnet set out for an expedition on their own account, Linnet being left at the church of San Zecaria, where she often went now to comfort herself with Bellini's Madonna and saints, in that dingy little side chapel, whilst her brother took a gondola and went to the Academy, promising to return in an hour or two to fetch her.

When he left the Academy it was raining heavily. So, crossing the bridge just opposite, he made for the nearest hotel, and went into the dining-room, where luncheon was just being served. Close to him, on his left hand, so close that he could scarcely turn to look at them without appearing rude, were two ladies and two gentlemen, who also seemed to have been driven in by the rain, and to have met there unexpectedly.

“One does meet so oddly in these big Continental places,” said the lady nearest Mr. Aubury. “I tell Willie it is never any use saying good-bye to anybody, for you are sure to run up against each other again in front of the next celebrated picture. I saw as many old friends in Florence last week as I should have done in a month in London.”

“Of course, because there are so few places to see them in. And what about *La Bella*? Did you enjoy it so very much, after all?”

“Yes. And those lovely old blues and greens in her dress. If one could but get such colours now-a-days! I was disappointed in the Fornarina, though. I had expected somebody a great deal more beautiful. I have seen people in our own village in Scotland as fair again, though one dare not say so for fear of being thought out of the pale of civilization. Do you enjoy pictures very much?”

"Tolerably, but I enjoy lace a great deal more. If you could but have seen some of that lace in the convents, Agnes, and at Santa Croce! I always used to go up as close as ever I could to the altars, so as to find out the stitches, you know. Perfectly exquisite! I wonder if any of it ever comes into anybody's hands for sale?"

"Oh! Margaret, how dreadful! The idea of selling altar lace! How could you think of such a thing? Why, you would never buy it, if you could, would you?"

"Oh! but wouldn't I? And be thankful enough for the chance. At San Lorenzo, in Florence, they have some of the very loveliest you can possibly imagine. What would I not give for just as much as would go down the front of a dress!"

"You are a perfect pagan, Margaret. I should expect a judgment to take place upon me if ever I put altar lace on a

dress, even to go to Court in. Did you have a pleasant time in Florence?"

"Oh! yes, very passable. Of course, one was obliged to go into raptures for the fiftieth time over the pictures in the Tribune. And what *do* you think? I came across old Plummersleigh there."

"Plummersleigh?"

"Yes. You must remember Plummersleigh, our maid, you know, up at Airdrie Muir. That steady, quiet, dependable creature, who had a worthless husband somewhere, and so took to being a lady's-maid again. I always say, if you want a really good, trustworthy maid, get one who is unhappily married. They always settle down so."

"I can't remember her one bit. What was she like?"

"Oh! passable. Neither plain nor pretty, but, as they say, just comfortable. Fair-looking, with particularly light eyelashes, and very quiet but decided ways. She

married a worthless fellow, and he was transported for stealing, and then she heard of his death."

"I think I remember her, now you mention the eyelashes. One does not often see them so light. I never knew she was married."

"Oh, yes. She was poultry-girl at old Lady Stormont's, before Willie came to the place, you know, and, being a pleasant-mannered girl, the upper servants took kindly to her, and, when her marriage turned out unfortunate, she had a few lessons and tried being lady's-maid. And a very good one too. I always said she was a woman of a great deal of force of character, or she could not have raised herself as she did."

"Poor thing! And with a bad husband, too."

"Yes, fearful. The best thing he could do was to die. But I fancy she has fallen on her feet at last, for she was so very

well dressed, and had quite lost the air of being in service. Indeed, she seemed rather disposed not to see me. You know it is rather awkward when people marry out of their sphere in that way."

"Oh! married again, then?"

"I should think so. I met her in Florence, with people of quite a nice sort, and I passed them all here in a gondola the other day. Are you going to the opera this evening?"

"No. I enjoy nothing more than sitting out on the hotel balcony and watching the people in the piazza. You do see such lovely girls amongst the common people. And then they all seem to be so happy. I don't wonder they pity us Britons. We must seem so dull and heavy."

"Speak for yourself, Margaret. I do not approve of such sweeping assertions as applied generally. How long do you stay in Venice?"

“Quite uncertain. When are you leaving?”

“I don’t know. It depends very much upon how Willie likes it. Perhaps a fortnight, a month, two months. There is no telling.”

“And where next?”

“There is no telling either. Willie talks about Rome, and being there in Holy Week, just to see the services, you know ; but it is no use making one’s plans so long beforehand. You see, we have the boys with us, but that does not make so much difference ; for Mr. Moriston is so perfectly trustworthy. We could go anywhere, and leave them with him.”

“Mr. Moriston? You have a fresh tutor.”

“Yes ; a very nice young fellow indeed, as steady as the Campanile yonder, which is such a comfort. You remember that *fiasco* with the other one? I almost

thought Willie would never have a tutor to travel with us again, but we can depend entirely upon this one. It is such a relief not to have to be always thinking about the children."

"From one of the Universities, I suppose?"

"Yes, Oxford; and before that from the Edinburgh High School, and before that from Airdrie Muir, where he used to keep sheep for Willie's father. Some benevolent lady in England took to him, and sent him to school, and all that sort of thing. Quite risen from the ranks, you see."

"Yes. Like Plummersleigh."

"Yes; only that he has raised himself higher. You see, when a man has anything in him, he can make his own way so much more easily than a woman."

"Then there is so much more credit due to the woman when she does make it. Plummersleigh seems quite prosperous,

judging from her appearance. Not that one can go much by dress now-a-days, though. I think it will soon be the maids that give us their cast-off clothes, instead of the other way."

And Lady Stormont looked down at her plain grey homespun, by no means so elegant a costume as that in which Mrs. Aubury had met her at the Uffizi Palace.

Mr. Aubury looked at his watch and found that it was time for him to pick up Linnet, whom he had left, sitting before Bellini's Madonna, in the Church of San Zecaria.

CHAPTER XIX.

THEY returned together to their hotel, overlooking St. Mark's Square. Mr. Aubury went up at once to his wife's room. She was sitting by the window, watching the people who were collecting to listen to the music, for this was the afternoon that the band played at the foot of the Campanile.

"Maria," he said, very quietly, "I have seen Lady Stormont again."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Aubury, just as quietly. And she determined that, fever or no fever, she would go home with her husband and Linnet the very next day.

The unhealthiness of the place was quite a sufficient excuse for leaving it. "And pray, who is Lady Stormont?"

"The lady with the large blue eyes, Maria. The same one who spoke to you in the Tribune, and whom we passed in the gondola by the *casa di Camillo*."

"How very curious! Did you meet her in a gondola again?"

"No. I turned into an hotel to escape a shower of rain, and sat down at the luncheon-table, and she and some other people were there, close to me. They seemed to be friends who had met accidentally."

"Very likely; people always do seem to be meeting accidentally in places like these. However, it is of no consequence to us, only it is rather curious to come across her so often. Have you enjoyed the Academy?"

"It does happen to be of a little consequence to us this time—to me, at any

rate, Maria. The two ladies, who were sitting close at my elbow, entered into conversation, and you were the subject of it. I know more now, Maria, than I ever knew about you before."

Mrs. Aubury's large, round eyelids dropped, but she gave no sign of discomposure, though it was only by a determined effort that she kept herself from reeling and falling. The room seemed to be swimming round with her. The people in the square below showed like a confused, many-coloured mass. It had come at last. Mrs. Flowerdale and Mrs. Polemont and all the rest of them would know now. She should go back to Abbot's Florey a disgraced woman. But she would make no sign yet. When that first sensation of dizziness passed off, she took up her work again and began playing with it, whilst she watched the people in the square.

"Maria, I suppose what I heard is correct?"

"It depends upon what you heard."

"I heard that you had lived in Lady Stormont's service as her maid."

"That is quite true."

"And why did you never tell me so?"

"Chiefly because you never asked me."

Without another word Mr. Aubury turned and went away, leaving his wife to think over matters at her leisure.

And she was not so frightened, when she came to think over them quietly. That which had appeared the most unpleasant part of the situation, the downfall which she should experience in the eyes of Abbot's Florey, was not so much to be feared. For, after all, she was Mr. Aubury's wife, his lawfully married wife. Nothing which she had done could deprive her of that position. And, so long as she was his wife, his own respectability depended to a certain extent upon hers. For his own sake he would probably choose to shelter her from unpleasant remark. Silence would

be his wisdom, as well as her safety. There was no need for the information of which he had so unfortunately become possessed to get abroad, unless by his own desire. And what could he gain by humiliating her, so long as that humiliation would only recoil upon himself?

Then there was another comfort. The Stormonts did not know anything about him. They had seen her with a gentleman and a young lady, and that was all. They would not be likely to trace her any farther, nor indeed had they any interest in doing so. It was most unfortunate that they should have stumbled upon each other, but it meant much more to her than to them. They would probably never give the matter another thought, nor, except so far as it had created an additional unpleasantness between her husband and herself, need she.

For the Stormonts never came to Abbot's Florey. Nor, if they did, would she be

likely to come across them. Nor would they ever hear her name mentioned there, the vicar and his wife being the only people of her acquaintance who ever went to the Park, and they going only once a year or so, on a visit of the merest ceremony, when gossip about the smaller people of the neighbourhood would be quite out of place. She need not distress herself so very much. The thing was certainly disagreeable, but it might have been worse. So long as the knowledge of it could be confined to herself and her husband she had no fear. She should be able to hold her own. She might even enter upon the subject with him when he came in again, and so give him to understand that she was not afraid of speaking unreservedly about it. Perhaps that would be the wisest course to take, not leaving it for him to begin, as though she were feeling too guiltily conscious to say anything herself. Or, better still, she

might, when he returned, commence by reminding him a little of her own claims ; for, after all, there were attentions due to her, and nothing was ever gained by allowing them to be remitted. So she waited quietly.

It was late in the afternoon before Mr. Aubury came back. His wife received him as if nothing had happened, or rather, perhaps, as if she had a little cause for complaint.

“I have been alone a long time to-day, Owen. You and Linnet seem to forget that I am not able to enjoy sight-seeing so much as yourselves.”

“I am afraid you will have to make up your mind to it a little longer then, Maria. for I am going over to the Stormonts' hotel, to see Keith Moriston.”

Mrs. Aubury's face darkened. She thought he was spending his winter in Germany. Keith Moriston in Venice, and her husband going to see him, meant the

worst for herself. It was quite a new tangle in the skein which she thought, at any rate for the present, she had smoothed satisfactorily. For Keith Moriston would not keep her secret as it would be Mr. Aubury's interest to keep it.

"What is that young fellow doing here?" she asked, angrily. "You told me he was at Heidelberg."

"I told you what I thought at the time was correct. After that, you desired that his name should never be mentioned, and I told you no more. That young fellow happens to be here now as tutor to Lord Stormont's children, and I am going to call upon him. Do not wait for me if I am late home."

Mrs. Aubury felt that all was over for her now, but she would make one more effort to keep her husband under her own control. It was scarcely possible that, at one spring, he should gain the mastery entirely.

“Owen,” she said, with that authoritative manner which Florey Castle had learned so well how to respect and obey, “you are surely not going to put yourself in Moriston’s way again, and Linnet here, under our guardianship. I insist upon being consulted.”

“And I insist upon doing exactly as I like, Maria.”

With that Mr. Aubury left the room, and something told Maria that he would return no more as her obedient and docile husband.

Now indeed she had an unpleasant future to face. She could only judge of others by herself. What in their place she would have done, that she expected from them. And now that Keith Moriston knew of her tactics—and he certainly would know from Mr. Aubury,—what would give him so much pleasure as to revenge himself upon her by telling Mrs. Flowerdale, and Mrs. Polemont, and Miss

Alvisa all that he had to tell about her, and so making her the byword of the village? For that he did know, there could be little doubt. Even if a fortunate chance had kept him from learning it up amongst his own people at Airdrie Muir, it would be sure to be mentioned now by the Stormonts, even if her husband had self-respect enough to keep it silent.

So she should return to Abbot's Florey as the daughter of a labourer, the widow of a convict, the waiting-maid of a countess. A pleasant prospect, truly.

Still she was Mrs. Aubury. The husband who had given her his name could not take it from her. She had done nothing to forfeit her position as mistress of Florey Castle. Such supremacy as she could maintain there was still her own. But it was the call which the vicar's wife would take the very earliest opportunity of making upon her which brought the bitterest drop into her cup. She could

see it all so plainly : the courteous manner, the smiling congratulations upon her safe return home, the gradual turning of the conversation towards Keith Moriston and the Stormonts in such a way as to let her see that everything was known. It was more than she could bear.

A note came from Mr. Aubury to say that he was going to the opera after dining with Mr. Moriston ; and, as the performance would probably close late, he should spend the night at the Stormonts' hotel.

To make further inquiries about her, no doubt.

Then Linnet came in.

"Linnet, has your brother been saying anything to you?"

"No, Maria, except that he should be dining out this evening. He did not tell me where."

Nor did Mrs. Aubury. It was all right so far.

“Linnet, I feel very unwell. This fever is taking more hold upon me. I think I shall probably have an illness.”

But then Maria was constantly upon the brink of an illness, and it never got any further. Something, however, in her look and manner to-night was different.

“Let me call the porter and send for a doctor.”

“No, not yet. I will wait until to-morrow morning, then you can do as you like. Can you come and keep me company here.”

“Oh, yes!”

And Linnet brought her work, and they sat there by the window, listening to the music, watching the people in the balconies, and the many-coloured picturesque groups moving to and fro, and the great west front of St. Mark's darkening in the twilight, and the winged lion, and St. Theodore upon his crocodile, showing now only like silhouettes upon the sky where

the grand canal widened out into the Adriatic.

"Linnet, it is a long time since we had a quiet evening together."

"Yes."

And something in the tone gave Linnet, she knew not why, a feeling of pity towards this woman who had done her so much wrong, who had brought into her young life a loneliness to which as yet she saw no ending.

"Linnet, I have not always been so kind to you as I might have been."

"Never mind, Maria. Do not talk about it. We will be different now."

"Yes. I have no doubt many things will be different now. I want to tell you that I am sorry."

And a tremulous hand, very hot and dry, felt out in the gloom for Linnet's, which held it fast.

"Oh! please don't talk in that way, Maria. Things will all come right some-

how, and I am quite content. Do not trouble yourself about me. I am really content."

"That is more than I am, child. I want some one to comfort me to-night."

"You are feverish, Maria, and that makes people restless. You will perhaps be all right to-morrow. If not, brother Owen will send for a doctor."

"Yes. And, Linnet, you must do your best to forget. You are young. And I think you will be happy yet. And I want you to think kindly of me. One must have some one to think kindly of one."

"Of course you will, Maria," said Linnet, bewildered, and yet with a new strange longing in her heart towards this hard woman, upon whom something seemed to have fallen to soften her. Perhaps it was only being tired and alone that had done it. And brother Owen was so seldom away from them at night.

“Well, now, good night, Linnet. You can go.”

“Don’t you want me to do anything else for you, Maria?”

“No, only to kiss me.”

Which Linnet did, wondering much.

CHAPTER XX.

NEXT morning Mrs. Aubury was very ill. The doctor whom Linnet had sent for before her brother's return said it was malaria fever of a dangerous type, which had been lying in the system for some days. Mr. Aubury came, but his wife took very little notice of him. He and Linnet nursed her there as well as they could in the crowded hotel, full of careless comers and goers ; and, after a few days of unconsciousness, during which she made no sign to any of them, she died.

A curiously rapid case, the English doctor said, and one which he could not un-

derstand, her constitution being apparently vigorous. She ought to have been able to have resisted a fever of that kind, instead of succumbing to it so from the very first. But one could never tell. Life and death depended upon so many causes which were beyond the reach of medical science, power of will amongst them, which might be set in either direction, the patient's apparently not being set towards recovery.

So the black-beaked gondola carried Owen Aubury's wife across the lagune to the cemetery, and there they buried her, and no tears fell upon her grave. And then they left the great hotel in St. Mark's Square, and went to a quiet little *albergo* looking forth upon the grand canal, an out-of-the-way place where few people came or went. And once again the brother and sister had no one but each other, even as in the old time.

How far off that time seemed now! It was like years and years, and not six

little months, since, strolling together over the castle farm, they had met the vicar, and the hints had been let fall, and the words spoken which led Owen Aubury into such a dreary path.

He had no wish to go back to Abbot's Florey at present. The Stormonts had left unexpectedly for Rome, Keith Moriston with them. Linnet had never even seen him, nor known that he had been so near. So she and her brother settled down for a quiet time in Venice, after the wear and tear of the past few weeks. They had no friends there, no acquaintances, no one but each other and that grave in the English cemetery, to which they sometimes went, to lay a white flower of forgiveness on her breast who had wrought so much pain for them both. But Owen never told his young sister all that had happened. His wife had well judged him in that.

The Abbot's Florey people were of course very much astonished when they read in

the Broadminster paper the following announcement:—

“At Venice, on the 15th inst., of fever, Maria, wife of Owen Aubury, of Florey Castle Farm, —shire.”

“It is just like Mr. Aubury, George,” said Mrs. Polemont, “not to put ‘dearly beloved,’ or ‘deeply lamented,’ or anything of that sort, though I have not the least doubt he feels it just the same. He is a very tender-hearted man, you know.”

But the doctor said nothing.

Mrs. Polemont went on at once to tell Miss Alvisa, for, as she did not take a Broadminster paper, the intelligence might be new to her. And there she repeated the remark.

“It sounds cold, doesn’t it? But, at the same time, it is a great deal better than saying so much about one’s feelings. I believe Mr. Aubury was a very good husband.”

Miss Alvisa said she believed the same.

“And devoted in his attentions, though, poor thing! she has not lived very long to enjoy her new position. Only four months, Miss Alvisa; sad, isn't it? And to be snatched away so suddenly, and, do you know, I have the silver spray yet that was upon her wedding cake. I was almost afraid there would not be a wedding cake at all, they both wanted everything so quiet, but I insisted upon it; and a very pretty one it is. And now to think that she should be lying amongst the lagunes of Venice. Poor thing! I do feel so sorry. We were always exceedingly attached to each other.”

And then Mrs. Polemont wiped her eyes, and went on to Mrs. Flowerdale's.

The vicar's wife had, of course, seen the announcement in the papers, but she looked at the matter in an entirely different light.

“I thought perhaps they would have put whose daughter she was, and where

she came from. Of course her husband must have known, and people generally like to say the most that can be said at such times. You know, she always gave one to understand that she belonged to a superior family."

"Yes; but Mr. Aubury is not the sort of man to make a fuss about that, any more than he would make a fuss about his affection, which, I am sure, was most devoted. Really, the way he used to attend upon her, was beautiful."

"Yes. There might not be everything in it that we thought there was. I mean about her superior family. I suppose you never heard any further particulars?"

"No; and I never asked. I asked her once about Mr. Plummersleigh, and she said he was connected with one of those large steamship companies. Quite the position of a gentleman, you know."

"Yes. But then, after all," replied Mrs. Flowerdale, with her ruthless way of

going right down into a subject, "that depends upon *how* he was connected. You know, those great steamships have stokers and firemen, and they are all connected with the company, so that one cannot count that for much. Still it may be all right, and one need not say anything, now that she is gone, poor thing! I hope she is at peace."

"Oh! dear, yes," said Mrs. Polemont, with rather a shocked expression. "Of course she can't be anything else than at peace. She was really a most excellent creature. Most excellent, Mrs. Flowerdale."

"Yes, perhaps, on the whole, she was. I have no doubt he will marry again soon. Now that he has once had a wife, he will feel his loneliness so much more. And I should think he will come back again pretty soon to the castle."

"No. Miss Alvisa has heard from them, and she says they intend to remain in

Venice, or, at any rate, abroad, some weeks."

"You don't say so! It is a great pity. Coming back, after all that time, will only open the wound afresh. They had much better get it over at once, and settle down as they mean to go on."

"Poor thing! Well, it seems as if the castle was to have neither weddings nor funerals from it. Everything passes it by. Have you heard from the bride and groom?"

"Oh! yes. Georgiana is charmingly well, and as happy as possible. She says Mr. Burstborough *is* so good. They come home, you know, in about a week, and then we shall have to be quite gay. I daresay that is why Mr. Aubury is keeping away. You know it would have been rather awkward for poor Linnet."

"Yes; not that she has any feeling about it, though. I believe it was a great relief to her when it was broken off, and

still more so when he was engaged again."

Mrs. Flowerdale gave a series of sceptical little nods, which covered a depth of meaning.

"We don't understand everything, Mrs. Polemont."

Because, whatever it might be for Linnet, it was certainly better for Georgiana that the Abbot's Florey public should think Mr. Burstborough had taken an active rather than a passive part in the breaking of the engagement. One did not exactly like one's niece to marry a man who had so very recently been dismissed, and just on the eve of his wedding. One might as well put it that he had found reason to change his own mind.

And with those nods, which said more than words, and said it more neatly, too, Mrs. Flowerdale changed the conversation.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE blinds were drawn down in the old keep rooms. The castle servants were put into suitable mourning. Every respect of that kind which could be shown to her memory was shown. And after Mrs. Aubury's death had been talked of for a few days, and it had been ascertained that the family were not returning at present, things went back to their usual quietness. And save by Miss Alvisa, who thought her own thoughts as she lay on her sofa in that room whose window looked forth upon the dingle path, the Auburys were but little remembered.

“And so you see, Martlet, it wasn't for nothing I had that feeling come over me when I set the gate open for 'em all to start. I could have told there was going to be a something, as sure as sure. And that wasn't all, Martlet, for it was only a fortnight ago this very night, and if you reckon back it's the night the missis was took, I'd gone to bed, you being a trifle late, as you know I never do sit up for you when it's only going round about the plantations and things, and there was a flapping against the window outside, exactly as I heard it the night poor Miss Goodenough died, and I says to myself, Betsey Martlet, I said, if that isn't a warning you never had one in your life.”

“I wonder you didn't mention it, Betsey.”

“Because, Martlet, I'm one of them that think if you brew your tea when the kettle boils it's time enough. But my mind was set all along upon its being Miss

Linnet, and her having gone through all she had, and with that sort of look about her that didn't seem to take no interest in nothing. It never so much as seemed likely that the missis should be taken first. I'm sorry, and that's all I can say."

"And more for the master than yourself, Betsey, I lay, even when you've said that."

"I don't deny it, Martlet. Mrs. Aubury never was a woman that did me justice, and you can but say as you feel, let them be dead or let them be living, or let them be what they may. I've never got over that time, Martlet, when she mentioned to sister Wright about me being given to drink."

"Nay, never, Betsey! You didn't tell me that."

"No, but I felt it a deal, and always shall. And you, Martlet, as knows I can just swallow a drop, but not to say drink it—well, you would never have rested

until you'd been up and had your say about it, and so I thought quietness was the best, and, now she's gone, I don't wish to bear malice. But she and me would never have been friends after that."

"No, nor wouldn't need to. I lay you and me will shift back to the house now, Betsey. I mean when the master comes back."

"I don't care which way it is, Martlet, so long as the family is suited. I've been very comfortable here, though I won't deny but what it was a trouble to me when I had to give up the linen and the store closet as I'd been accustomed to manage everything since Mr. Aubury come to the place, and the same in Miss Goodenough's time, and did it always, too, to the best of my ability, and never a shilling spent that couldn't be accounted for satisfactory. But, when a wife comes, where are you?"

"Where she thinks fit to put you,

Betsey, and nowheres else. I won't say but what it's been hard upon you, this four months past."

"You're right, Martlet, and me not the woman to sit still with one above me. There's a many can do it, and keep a thankful spirit, but that's not me. If I can't be top where I know I'm doing my duty with a good heart and a willing, well, I'd rather let it alone, and that's where me and madam didn't square it. But I could have put up with a deal, if it hadn't been for that about the taking too much. That was it that finished it, Martlet, though I never opened out to you for fear of mischief."

"Yes, and mischief there would have been, plenty, Betsey, if I'd have known such a thing said of you, and you what you are in a house, as there's few like you. I'm not afraid to say it, Betsey, though I know there's many wouldn't, for fear of a woman taking advantage afterwards.

Meanness, that's what I call it, when a woman does her best, and the man she does it for's afraid to own it."

"Then that isn't you, Martlet, and there's an end. And now we shall settle down again, same as we'd use to be before ever the master was wed, this time twelve-month back, when Miss Linnet was a wild young thing, flying about the land with Snip and Bobtail at her heels, and never no thought of anything how to manage a house. Dear me! the trouble I had to get her to take an interest in the jams and home-made wines, because of her always wanting to nip off after some of the live creatures on the farm. Settled we shall be again, Martlet, when the master comes home, I don't doubt; but, what she was a twelvemonth back, Miss Linnet never will be again, I doubt a deal."

"Ay, Betsey, forrads them you may, but backen them you can't; no more can you tell what they mean to grow to. You

may wait long enough before you'll see Miss Linnet singing through the plantation with the dogs after her. It's other than singing that she's got to do now, bless her !”

“ Well, I don't care what it is, so long as she's a stout heart to do it with. It's to see her going about with never a smile on her face, or a bit of spring in her step as used to put me past my patience. And all for no fault of her own, as I was sure from the beginning it wasn't. But, whatever comes, the Lord send us a quiet life and a comfortable, for that's what we stand in a deal of need of.”

CHAPTER XXII.

AND it was as quiet a life as anyone could have desired for them that Owen Aubury and Linnet lived after the four months' wife had been laid to her rest, and they had removed to the little hotel looking over the canal to Santa Maria Della Salute.

The whole place, as he wandered about it, sometimes with his sister, sometimes alone, was full of that which gives its strongest interest to all beauty, whether of art or nature—association, not with the magnificent past of history, but with the more vivid past of personal memories.

For it was at that quiet, out-of-the-way little hotel he had stayed for a night or two ten years before, when coming home from India to claim his bride. In that same porter's room, close by the doorway, he had received Miss Alvisa's letter, which had been waiting there for him whilst steamer after steamer arrived. He remembered how, trying all the time to appear quite calm and unmoved, he had sought it out and hurried away with it into the cathedral, and there, making for himself a shrine of his own faithful thoughts, he had read and pondered its every word, so full of brightness and hope. And leaving St. Mark's then, in the lessening afternoon light, he had climbed the Campanile hard by, and looked northward, away to her home ; and brighter than any sunset glow reddening over lagoon and dome and palace, was that cold, clear northern light to him, for its stars were over the land where she dwelt.

And Venice was the last place which on that homeward journey had any glow of hope for him. For, when next he halted, it was to receive the letter which told him that no bride, but only a life-long invalid, waited for cherishing and love of his. Which, indeed, he had given to her faithfully enough, and perhaps at last she might know it.

And now, coming to the old city again after all those years, it shone for him in the light of the old hope. On its walls, amethyst, jasper, and sardius in the glow of the western sun, there seemed to be written the story of those sweet long-ago days, speaking to him still from column and archway and leafy capital—speaking to him tenderly as ever, for no disloyalty of his had dimmed the vision with which he read. And with the closing of that grave amongst the reedy lagunes, had passed away the cloud which for awhile had hidden his former life. Now that life

was all his own again, to remember and watch over, as during the best years of his manhood he had done, with no hope of its being other than a shadow to him. Nor had he hope of anything better now. Yet, contrasted with the bleak outlines of the reality which the last few months had made for him, how fair even that shadow seemed ! To be able to go back and live within it again was better than any other sunshine.

And so they stayed on together, these two, brother and sister, in the old city of Venice, where she sits a widow now and desolate, folding in her worn-out garments the mouldering treasures of her past ; these all she has now, even these so dimly understood by the gaping modern crowd who come and go amongst the ruins of her splendour. The stories which her children of old told so nobly in graven stone, or pictured canvas, or glowing mosaic, believed no longer, cared for only as they

served, centuries ago, to kindle a fire of enthusiasm in the artist's soul, or steep his brush in colours which, for the delight they bring, and not for the story they tell, the world will not let decay.

And chiefly amongst all the quiet resting-places of Venice Owen Aubury and his sister used to go to the Church of San Zecaria, and sit in one of the little side-chapels there, before Giovanni Bellini's Madonna and saints. Ten years before, Owen had loved that picture, because something in the meekness, and grace, and humility of the Madonna's face reminded him of Alvisa Clerehart. And now, even more than ever, it seemed as if she were speaking to him from its perfect repose of love. Linnet, looking upon that face, learned to love it too, seeing in it, as her brother did, the reflected tenderness of the woman who had been so much to both of them. And truly, no saint labouring here in faithful duty, or resting yonder in

crowned peace, had done the labour with truer patience or won the rest more nobly than Alvisa Clerehart.

Linnet's life was slowly gathering up, not its old brightness, but a new peace, which might one day be better than the brightness. For, as old Martlet wisely said, "You may forrads them, if you like, but backen 'em again you can't, do as you will." There is no cutting the growth of a human life back again to the fresh little young leaves from which it made its first start in the sunshine of spring. Those leaves have done their work, and they must die when their time comes. The life that had been forced back from its natural outlet when that beautiful blossom of hope so rudely fell, was concentrating itself within, enriching her whole being, strengthening it for a better blossoming when the winter of patience should have done its healing work. But the flower that stretched up so bravely to the

sunlight once would never come again.

Linnet did not know that Keith Moriston had been so near her. But one thing she knew, that, whether coming years should separate or give them to each other again, she did not need now to cast him out of her thoughts, as one who had first tried to win her love, and then so cruelly flung it away. She had given all she had to give. It might so be she had given it vainly for the earthly ending of love, but she had not given it for naught. For nought? nay, the rich reward of all she had suffered for it was now being daily poured into her life in that peace which literally passeth knowledge—the peace which comes of self conquered, of disappointment nobly met.

The quest of the Sangreal was achieved in her at last. Faring forth from the castle of her pride, she had done battle with many a deadly enemy in that forest of struggle and temptation through which

the quest had driven her. Now, quiet in a little sanctuary, made for her by faithful, loving thoughts, praying only for light to see the noblest, and courage to follow it, the peace which passed before her there was the vision of God Himself, as the pure in heart see Him; that Holy Grail which once achieved brings the new life, death of all past which can hurt or wound, freedom to all which can truly lift the soul heavenwards. And for no Sir Galahad in old Arthurian legend had the fight in that quest been sorer, or the victory more hardly won.

Linnet and her brother had been in Venice nearly three months. For both of them, living, each unknown to the other, so keen and deep a life,—he in sweet return to that past from which the chance of a word had parted him, she in as sweet return to that out of which her own impatience had cast her—the time had seem-

ed much more than that, so great a deep of experience being compassed by them. They were to leave the city in a week, returning leisurely, so as to reach Florey Castle by the end of April. And Linnet had gone alone, for the last time, to have a quiet hour before Giovanni Bellini's picture in the little side chapel of San Zecaria.

Never had that picture seemed to her so fair before, nor the autumn glow of its colouring so full of warmth through which the soul and meaning of the painter burned. Linnet sat and pondered over it, trying to fix every detail in her memory ; so that afterwards, under colder skies and amidst different influences, she might be able to shut her eyes, and read the painter's thought again, as he had been telling it to Venice and the world these four hundred years past.

There, with half downcast eyes, the Madonna sat, enthroned under a dome from

whose roof the mosaics glowed down upon the tiny figure of the child Christ, whom she held upon her knee; and, as she held him, she turned her bowed head aside, that the homage given by standing saints should be not for her, but himself. Near to the throne, on either side, with palm branches in their hands, and meek, reverent faces, and robes full flowing to their feet, stood two fair women saints, with no thought but for the Christ to whom they were bringing their offering of perfume and casket. Farther from the throne, and with faces neither looking to it nor the Christ upon it, St. Peter on one side, grand in embroidered mantle and girdle, held a sealed book in his right hand, his left tightly clasping the keys, the calm of conscious power upon his bared forehead, the dignity of kinghood in his upright, majestic mien. On the other side St. Augustine, hooded, and with thoughtfully-bowed head, pondered over his open book,

a look of searching inquiry upon his face, in deep shadow beneath its monkish cowl, so deep that the light from the child Christ reached it not at all, only glanced upon his mantle's lining.

Had old John Bellini a truth to tell in this grouping of his picture? Would he teach the Venetians of his time, and us after them, that pride of priestly learning and pomp of priestly authority stand not so near to Christ as the simple faith and the lowly reverence which look upward and are blessed? that the perfume of prayer, the holding forth of the casket of self-sacrifice, is better than much study and all ecclesiastical power? that to do the known is holier than to search for the unknown; that dark must be the countenance that bends even over divine things, unless turned towards the light of simplicity and child-like trust; and that priestly robes may shine in the reflected glow of a throne, while yet the book of

wisdom and the face that painfully bends over it, are full of shadow and gloom?

That was the message the picture had to give to the girl who pondered it, sitting there in the sunlight of April morning, in San Zecaria's chapel. And so intent was she upon that message that she took no note of her brother's coming in, or of the stranger who came with him, and sat near her. Or, if she took note of them at all, it was only to think that they were tourists, entering that little chapel as so many entered it, to stare for a moment or two, and then depart, having given Bellini's picture its sufficient meed of admiration. For it was doubtless marked in their guide-books with a couple of stars, that number being necessary to direct the attention of the average European to the child Christ, though of old time one, shining over against the place where he lay, was enough to guide the Eastern sages to him.

But these strangers stayed a longer time,

and stayed more quietly than most who came there. At last, lifting her eyes, Linnet saw that they were her brother and Keith Moriston.

A great wave of memory arose within her, and seemed to bear her along before it. For awhile she sat as if in a dream. Then, steadying herself, so that her faltering steps should not be known, she made her way towards the heavy curtain that overhung the door, having but one thought now, to shield herself from the eyes which she felt must be searching down and reading all that was in her heart still.

But, before she reached the doorway, a great hand took hold of her, and a quiet voice said,

“ You are to come with me.”

And as once, at Miss Alvisa's gate, something had forced her to obey that hand and that voice, so she obeyed now, and came back to where they led her.

It was only to the old black oak-bench in front of the Madonna and saints. But, oh! how much more it meant than that; for it meant leading back to the warmth and brightness and sunshine of a life which she had thought gone for ever. And if St. Augustine, poring with darkened face over his book of wisdom, seemed to frown upon them, and if St. Peter, broad-browed and majestic, took no note of their joy, the Child Christ, stretching out His little hand, stretched it in blessing for them. And the fair maiden saint, with a smile that told of earthly peace now, as well as heavenly, leaned her palm-branch towards them, and bade them welcome to the rest they had waited for so patiently.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TOWARDS the end of that April, Mrs. Martlet received instructions to have the castle put in order for the reception of its master. And she was bidden, at the same time, to have the guest-room prepared, as Mr. Moriston would be returning with them.

“And if that doesn’t tell its own story, Martlet,” she said, as, bristling all over with the dignity of newly revived housekeeperly importance, she hurried to and fro, spreading her store of snowy, lavender-scented linen over the “winter hedge” in front of the great kitchen fire, “If

that doesn't tell its own story, Martlet, I should like to know where and what I am, for I don't know."

"Yes," said Martlet, shrewdly, "it's in good big capital letters, is that; and glad I am to read 'em. All the same, Betsey, I told you, from the very first, how it was going to be. If she wasn't for him, she wasn't for nobody. And now there'll be a wedding at last, there will."

"Yes; only it'll take her away, which the other wouldn't have done. And, not to have her, Martlet, the place won't seem like itself."

"No, Betsey, but it was your own self said you'd a great deal rather she went that way than that it should be Mr. Burstborough."

"And so I did, Martlet, and so I say still; and, if Mr. Burstborough had been twice the man he is for wealth, and his fine house, and all the rest, they would be my words all the same, without a differ-

ence. And it's welcome he is to Mrs. Flowerdale's niece, and my best wishes for 'em both; for, being a wedding there, it puts it past a doubt that Miss Linnet, bless her, will be all right. Else I'd always had my fears that he might come down awkward, if anything happened, and her giving him up as she did. There was a many, Martlet—and my sister Wright among them—said he could have had the law upon her.”

“Ay, and the laugh upon himself, if it had come to that, Betsey. As if there hadn't been plenty more to choose from, and them more of a piece with himself than our young lady.”

“Martlet, you're at it again.”

“I mean no disrespect, Betsey. And there's the facts, him being married as he is, which he couldn't have been, if there wasn't some one ready.”

“Well, I won't say but what you're right, Martlet, putting it that way. But all the

same, knowing me not to like anything of the sort, you'd as well have been silent."

And Betsey proceeded to look over her linen-book, with a view to deciding whether the snowdrop pattern or ivy-leaf should be got out to do honour to the approaching return of the family.

"I believe Miss Linnet had as soon it was the snowdrop, because of the other being had out when Mrs. Aubury and Mrs. Polemont had used to come to spend the day, and that was the beginning of trouble for her, poor thing, though there's no need to speak of it, now that them that brought it is out of the way. And the best lodging-room to be stripped and the oak rubbed down, as it's a good day's work Tidy and me will have over that, if it's a minute. But I couldn't do it for anybody with a better good will than I'm going to for young Mr. Moriston. The only thing is the master will be so lonesome when she's gone. And that's a thing he's never

known yet, isn't to be lonesome in this house."

The opportunity was too tempting to be resisted. Martlet felt he must say a smart thing when it came into his head, even if Betsey did speak her mind about it.

"I don't doubt," he said, drily, "there's a many would be glad enough to come when Miss Linnet's gone, so as he shouldn't feel it, if that's all."

Martlet wisely moved towards the open door as he made this remark, not wishing to suffer in the cause of truth. But Betsey was down upon him before he had time to make his exit.

"There you go again, Martlet, and shifting yourself off before you think anyone can give you a back answer. If you've spoke a true word, why don't you stand to it like a man?"

"The words is there, Betsey. They were out almost afore I had time to think, and no disrespect, as I said before."

“Yes,” said Betsey, facing about upon him with an armful of linen which she had just taken down to fold. “It is a disrespect, and one which I’ll see to it you’ll have cause to rue if you mention it before me again. It wasn’t from me, Martlet, you learned that way of thinking. The times and times you were down on your knees to me, in this very kitchen where you’re standing now, when Miss Good-enough was missis of it, and you wanted me to speak the word. It wasn’t so very ready you found me then, nor Mr. Cratesley neither—him that has his shop and back parlour this very day in Broadminster town, and was as anxious to keep company with me as ever you were yourself. Talk about the women always being so ready and willing, indeed! If they are, it’s the men as starts it.”

“I think I shall be like to go and see after getting the garden fettled,” he remarked, with a subdued air, still making

for the back yard. "There's a deal to do afore things is fit for company."

Betsey snorted indignantly, and swung up a fresh armful of sheets to air.

"Ay, that's it. Come and set yourself up and give a bit of a bark, and then find you've nothing to say when you've done. Martlet, you're a man that's easy shut up when you've said a foolish thing. I wonder you say it so often, when a word upsets you."

"It isn't the word, it's her as says it," replied Martlet, gallantly, thinking that the sooner he retreated from an untenable position the better. "You're one in a thousand, Betsey, and worth a better man than me to have gone down on his knees to you fifty times over. There, then, will that please you?"

And, on the strength of this apology, Martlet ventured a few steps back into the genial atmosphere of the kitchen.

His wife said nothing, only smiled as

she counted over a fresh pile of pillow-slips. She had had her innings, and that was all she cared for. With the magnanimity of a conqueror, she now recognised the ground upon which her husband had taken up his retreat.

"Yes, there'll be fettling enough to do outside before things is as fit as I mean 'em to be within, for, worry after them as you will, a hired man *is* only a hired man, when you've said and done all, and doesn't take an interest in the place same as one that lives upon it. But still it's only to speak the word, when once they know the master's coming back, and we shall see them begin to stir as if they meant it. I lay you'll have to begin with the dingle. What a wilderness it has been, to be sure, ever since the leaves started to fall! And such store as Miss Linnet always set by it! You'll be like to see it all put tidy afore she comes."

"Nay, then, that shan't I," said Martlet,

conclusively, knowing that, however wrong he might have been proved to be on the woman question, he was right in his knowledge of the subject on which he was speaking now. "That dingle shan't be touched while Miss Linnet, bless her! takes her walk through it again. And if she don't do it afore ever she sets a foot on aught else belonging to the farm, my name isn't Luke Martlet, so now you know, you do."

"Martlet!" said his wife. "And you that man for tidiness you always were. And that path down to the swan-pools so as you can't set a foot in it, but you must tread on the leaves that's been lying there ever since Miss Linnet took her last walk down, the very morning she went away along with the master and her that's gone."

Martlet gathered up his pipe and tobacco pouch in preparation for a smoke outside, not having been able to indulge in that

luxury in the presence of the clean linen which was airing before the fire. And he said, looking not at his practical, clear-headed wife as he said it, but away towards the greening buds of the dingle trees,

“It was there Miss Linnet and Mr. Moriston had their parting, Betsey, and it's there she's thought her thoughts of him ever since, and she'd rather see it a wilderness, same as it was when they come up it last time, than have it swept as clean as a new pin, ay, as clean as all the gardeners in Abbot's Florey can make it. And see it so she shall.”

Betsey gave a sort of despairing sigh.

“Well, to be sure! And to think there's people so foolish!”

“Betsey, honey, look here.” And Martlet, with his pipe and tobacco pouch in his hand, pointed through the open door to a little thatched cottage, whose blue smoke was rising above the purple-brown ridges

of one of Mr. Aubury's wheat-fields a quarter of a mile away.

"Betsey, afore you and me had scarce begun to keep company, you comed to mother's house one night, up the front path, where there wasn't many coming and going. And you sat you down a bit with us, and a good time it was for me, though I didn't say a deal, only stood and watched you as the firelight showed up your face, and, said I to myself, that's the fairest face ever I set eyes on, and, Betsey, I think so still, for all I may speak a word now and again as you don't think respectful to the rest of the women folk."

"Never mind, Martlet, now," said Betsey, laying down an armful of sheets to wipe a tear out of her blue eyes. For he was a good man, this of hers, after all.

"And, Betsey, it was the winter time, and afore you went back there was a little snow fell, and after it a frost, to set it like; and next morning there was your every

footmark down that path, as clear as clear could be, and stayed there many a day, because of the frost keeping on, and nobody coming and going but only yourself that night. And mother she said to me why didn't I get agate and sweep down to the front gate, same as I'd always been used to when there was snow, and I kind of made a sort of excuse as it wasn't worth meddling until the rest came. But, Betsey, do you think I'd have disturbed them footmarks of yours, as long as they lay there so clear, and me not often getting a sight of you, as I didn't in them days? No, never. And that's the way Miss Linnet feels about that dingle path."

Betsey shook herself, as though some web which September morning dew has clustered with pearl-drops was hanging about her, and then she turned stoutly to the folding of the sheets. But there was a sunny smile upon her face, through all its homely common-sense.

“ Well, Martlet, folks is different. That’s all I can say they are. I’ve been a good wife to you, Martlet, and a loving, same as you’ve always been the best of husbands to me ; but if you’d ever left so much as a footmark on this here kitchen floor in them days, when Miss Goodenough had used to let you come and sit with me of a Sunday evening when the other girl was out, do you think I’d have let it stay there because it was your own ? Nay, not I. I’d have had brush and besom to it as heartily as if it had been yon man from Broadminster town, with his shop and back parlour, that had left it. And yet, Martlet, it isn’t a deal that I’ve had to find fault with myself where it was duty to you that had to be done, for all I mayn’t have had it same as some in other ways. But now get you gone to the garden, and Tidy and me will set to upon the front lodging-room. There’s a deal to do, and not a vast of time to do it in.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

OLD Martlet was right. Mr. Aubury and Linnet and Keith Moriston came home to the castle farm one pleasant April afternoon, when the lilacs in the courtyard were beginning to awake and put on their beautiful garments, and upon the sunniest slopes of the hedgesides the wild hyacinths showed their faint grey blue amongst the last year's leaves. But, turning away from them all, Linnet and Keith went down the dingle path, where the elm-trees scarce had put out a bud yet, and the hazel catkins hung bloomy green from their leafless stems, and only the primroses were come

to bring the golden promise of the spring. And there those two stood together by the swan-pool, the flag-leaves whispering by them, the forget-me-not plants growing down to the water's edge, the sedge locking its long fingers together round a bit of mouldering stump, which swayed to and fro with the current, those sedge fingers only holding it from drifting out of sight. And Keith looked along the banks for the place where they had paused that August night in the moonlight, thinking to know it again by the bit of willow-branch upon which the mossy legend of their love was traced. And, finding it not, Linnet was obliged to tell him all.

"Peace, little one," he said, stooping down to kiss her as she stood there with the bright tears in her eyes. "It is written now where you cannot fling it away any more."

And whilst they loitered there in the dingle, with spring flowers under their

feet, and the sweeter flowers of hope fresh blooming in their hearts, Owen Aubury went to the old house by the church, where Miss Alvisa was waiting for him.

Through the open window she also looked to the golden promise of the spring. He brought it to her as he entered, and taking her hand quietly in his, pressed upon her cheek the kiss which had so long been left ungiven.

"You have come back," she said. And in her patient eyes there was a meaning deeper than the words.

"No, Alvisa; for truly I never left you."

And then he told her how the burden of her unspoken reproach had been borne by him, that he might shield from humiliation the woman he never loved, who never loved him.

But he told her no more, nor did she ever learn more, than that. And the wife who had taken so much and given so

little, lay there in her grave amongst the cypresses of Venice, none but her husband knowing how much she had deceived him.

So once more the sunshine of perfect peace arose upon those two. And it seemed to them both that Keith and Linnet, down in the dingle amongst the primroses, telling the story of a love whose memories were as yet so young, could not be blest as they who, coming out of long shadow and waiting, had won at last the calm of perfect trust.

And Dr. Polemont was right. For though Linnet is far away with her husband in India now, and Owen lives on still at Florey Castle, he does not live there alone.

THE END.

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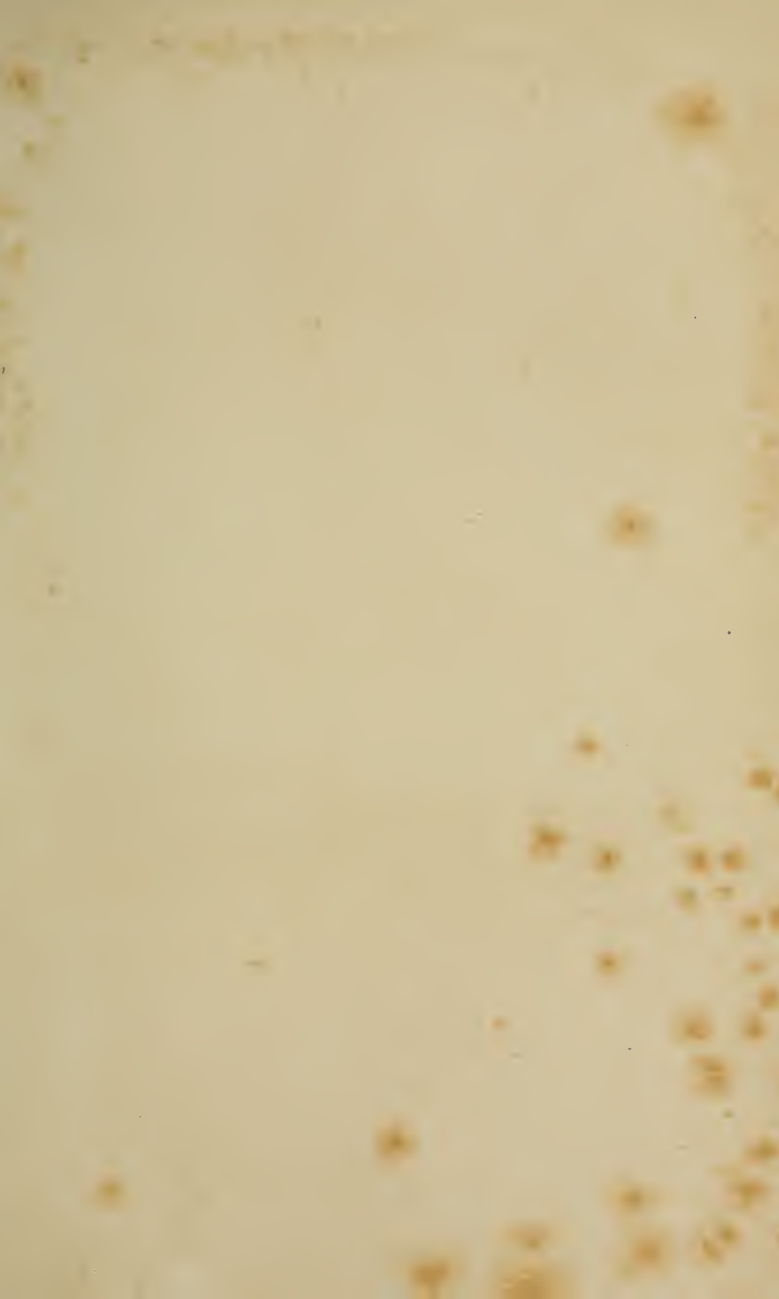
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